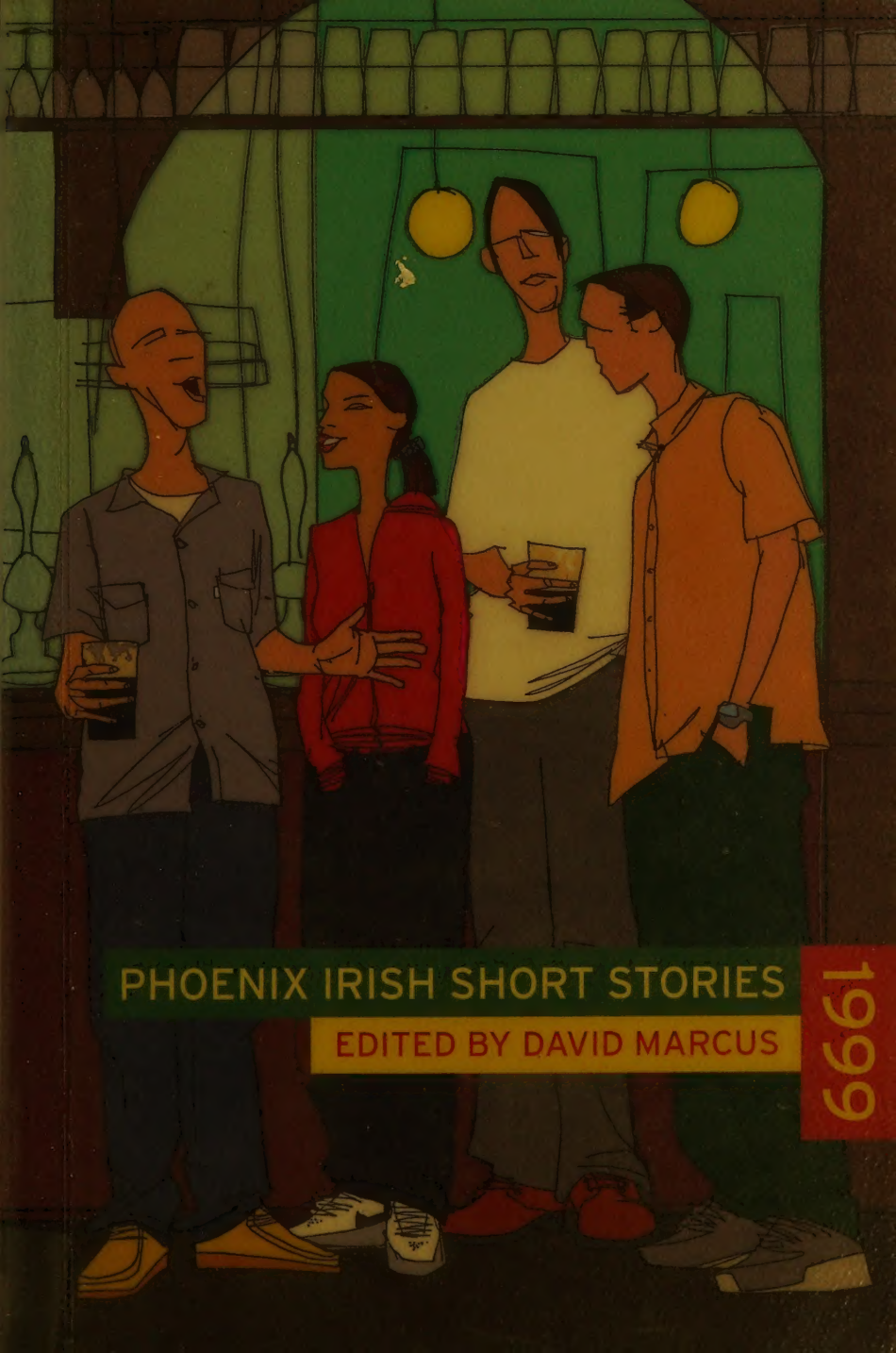
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EDITED BY DAVID MARCUS
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Phoenix IRISH SHORT STORIES 1999

edited by David Marcus

PHŒNIX

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last four decades the Irish short story has experienced a sea change. Indeed, it needed to if it was to hold its place in the short story's premier league. Unfortunately, it is the league itself that has lost much of the éclat it had in the first half of this century, a loss which inevitably led to its now diminished readership.

Mind you, standards haven't fallen. Today's best short story writers in the US, Ireland and Britain are the equal of those of yore. It may even be the case – it certainly is in Ireland – that as many prentice writers still take their first literary steps by writing short stories as always did. But very few of those who prove to have a special talent for the form stay with it.

And who can blame them? In these islands how many high-standard literary periodicals are there that publish short stories? The fingers of one hand will suffice. And how many short stories, on average per issue, do they give space to? Try the other hand. The real attraction for the writer is where the money is, in the novel and in film scripts.

But no good cause is ever lost, as the appearance of this collection – the fourth in the annual anthology of Irish short stories published by one of Britain's leading publishers – stubbornly proves. The highly complimentary *Irish Times* review of the 1998 anthology concluded with the unfortunate comment, 'A pity it's published in England [*sic*].' To answer the question begged: firstly, for a number of reasons, mostly financial, no Irish publisher of fiction work could take on such a venture; and secondly, with Irish writers, especially the up-and-coming, for some considerable time the magnet for British publishers, Phoenix House it was that stepped in and made this annual anthology possible. Thereby they gained a deserved first sight of the early

work of many of those newcomers and also provided an invaluable showcase, both in Ireland and Britain, for the best new stories coming out of Ireland and from Irish writers living abroad.

It should be noted, too, that some of those best new stories are by non-Irish writers who have been living in Ireland for some years. In this volume there are five such writers, four from the US and one from Britain. Their work is a welcome invigorating current in the sea change experienced by the contemporary Irish short story.

DAVID MARCUS

MARIE ALTZINGER

Fraying at the Edges

Old Mrs Nugent shuffles out of Matron's right ear. The walking-frame, followed by one foot, then the other.

'Are you listening to me?'

Matron pauses.

'Mrs Christie? Ellen!'

Mrs Nugent is half-way across the window. Passing the middle bar. Soon she will disappear into deep plum folds of velvet curtain.

'Ellen, I'm talking to you.'

Ellen Christie wrests her attention back into the room. Matron heaves herself out of the leather chair and lumbers around the mahogany desk. She looms over Ellen, blocking the light.

'Have you heard anything I've said?'

Ellen looks up at the florid face, the piercing pinprick blue eyes set in puffy skin creases above a network of broken veins.

'Have I been wasting my breath?'

Matron's wattles shake like a turkey cock's and Ellen slips back seventy-five years. Standing on a stool, leaning over her grandmother's knotted wooden table to give the Christmas bird a lucky pinch on its way into the oven. She remembers the cold clammy feel of the bird's fine skin and looks at the back of her own hand. Pale and mottled grey. Like the turkey. She pinches the knuckles of her middle finger, leaving scratch marks from jagged nails.

Matron grabs her hand.

'You mustn't do that! You mustn't hurt yourself. Or Mr Kennedy.'

Matron is standing too close. Much too close. Ellen tries to pull her hand free but Matron has an iron grip. And Ellen's attention. Her breath is hot on Ellen's face. Garlic-soaked.

'You cannot do destructive things. What you did to Mr Kennedy was totally unacceptable. Do you understand that?'

She leans closer. The garlic is nauseating. Ellen turns her head away. Matron's mouth sucks itself into prissy oblivion.

'The other matter – the sheet – that's not a problem. We expect that. It's part of growing old.'

Ellen looks over Matron's head. A cream fantail pigeon flutters past and vanishes into a sycamore tree. There is a sudden rush of wind.

'Please don't put me in a nappy.'

It was her usual nap. Take off shoes. Skirt. Push back the blankets and lie down. Feel the stodgy food digesting. Look at the stippled ceiling and drift. Ellen had followed this after-lunch routine for seven years. Ever since she first came to St Anne's Bower. She didn't particularly like it but there was little else to do. And it shortened the afternoon. She woke from a dream of torrential rain. Everywhere was soaked. But outside, the sky was blue. Our Lady's blue, her grandmother used to call it. A stray cloud skittled across, just below the top of the window. So where was the rain? Ellen ran a hand between her knobbly back and the bed. Sitting up stiffly, she leant on the headboard and lowered her feet to the ground, feeling for her slippers. She took a deep breath and steadied herself against the bedside locker. The lamp rocked precariously. And then she turned. To see what she didn't need to see. A large yellowing stain on the sheet.

Her mouth went dry, saliva shrivelling like it did when you ate sherbet from the jar in your grandmother's kitchen.

'Oldtimers.'

Suddenly she couldn't breathe. There was a lump in her chest like a mound of uncooked dough. Oldtimers. The word began to beat in her temple with the rhythm of a jungle drum. Oldtimers. She rested her hand on the yellow stain. The sheet was warm. Oldtimers. How often had she said it about the others? Miss McBride drinking from the milk-jug.

'She has Oldtimers.'

Mrs Nugent stirring her tea with her knife and buttering her bread with a spoon.

'She has Oldtimers.'

Even Arthur Kennedy. Talking to his plants and calling them pet names.

'Oldtimers.'

'For God's sake, Mother.' Julia's nasal tones rang in her head. 'It's Alzheimer's. And why do you have to keep commenting? It's part of old age. Learn to accept it.'

But it was different having it yourself. How did you learn to accept that? And where did you begin? Maybe it was like Alcoholics Anonymous. You said it aloud.

'My name is Ellen Christie, and I'm an Oldtimer.'

She buried her face in the comfort of the warm damp sheet.

Half an hour later she watched the water swirl down the plughole like a cut-glass corkscrew. It made a sucking belching sound. She rested her chest against the edge of the bath and caught her breath before reaching down and spreading the sheet across the bottom. The movement caused a sharp stabbing pain behind her breastbone. There was a faint stain outlined on the cloth but it would be less noticeable when it dried. Or would it be more noticeable? Ellen couldn't remember what happened to stains. There was a lot she couldn't remember these days.

As she took up one corner of the sheet and began to squeeze, her hand reminded her of tentacles of black ivy clinging to an aged tree-trunk at the bottom of her childhood garden. She'd always thought the ivy was trying to strangle the tree. Suck the life out of it. The day her grandmother died the tree was struck by lightning. Her mother said it was dangerous and had it felled. The ivy continued to grow along the dark stone wall, smothering all in sight. Her mother's name was Ivy.

'Hello?'

There was someone in her bedroom. Arthur. Arthur Kennedy from next door. Ellen froze. In the silence, her nose began to click. Julia always said she imagined this. But Julia thought she imagined everything.

'Hello? Ellen? Mrs Christie? I've come to check your plants.'

Go away, Ellen willed him silently. Go away. And then the shampoo bottle toppled over the side of the bath and crashed to

the tiled floor. Shiny turquoise liquid ran along the cracked grouting.

'You in the bathroom? It's me. Come to do your plants.'

Arthur leant on the window-sill, the red watering-can shaking in his good hand. Dust particles danced around him like fairy-lights. One of the strands he so carefully arranged across his bald pate was standing up and his bushy white eyebrows twitched as he blinked at Ellen squeezing out through the half-open bathroom door. Then he sucked in his breath and looked away quickly, a hint of pink seeping up his cheeks and spreading across his head. Ellen's hand slid to the top of her thigh. She'd forgotten to put her skirt back on. Arthur turned to the nearest geranium.

'You're looking a bit parched.'

Ellen grabbed her tweed skirt and stuffed one leg into the opening. There was a ripping as she pulled it up, and she staggered against the wall to stop herself falling. She knew the man in Arthur wanted to help. But the gentleman kept his back turned. As she felt the cool wall against her back it occurred to Ellen that etiquette could be an excuse for bad manners.

She heard the door click and sensed Julia before she saw or heard her.

'What on earth . . . ?'

Arthur turned, at pains not to look at Ellen.

'I was just . . .'

Julia was now in the room, displacing a disproportionate amount of air, blustering to take command.

'Oh that's all right, Mr Kennedy. The plants, I presume?'

Arthur nodded nervously like a pigeon pecking grain.

'I'd better be off then.'

With that he went to move but Ellen blocked his way.

'Did you never hear of knocking, Missy?'

'Mother, for heaven's sake, the door was open. And what have you done to your clothes?'

The muscles in Ellen's neck began to twitch. The more she tried to control them, the worse they got. She could feel her hair-grips loosening over her ears. Julia always had this effect on her when there was someone else present. Her voice came from so far back in her throat that it hurt to speak.

'Mr Kennedy was visiting and you just barge in. Who do you think you . . .'

'It's all right, Mrs Christie . . .'

'It's not, Mr Kennedy. Just because I'm old, my daughter does not have the right to . . .'

Julia reached past her and, grabbing Arthur by the shoulder, hustled him towards the corridor. 'Mother, don't be ridiculous. You knew I was coming. We're going for a little drive. It's a beautiful day. Now. let's get you out of those wet clothes.'

The sharp retort aborted between Ellen's dentures because Arthur was passing the bathroom door. He didn't stop but she knew he'd seen. Suddenly all the air whooshed out of her lungs like a bellows collapsing. There was no point in arguing with Julia.

They drove in silence along the coast road. Julia's deodorant wasn't working and there was a smell from her like cabbage boiled in sugar. It reminded Ellen of yesterday's lunch. The sun was a luminous ball high in the sky and far below the sea glistened gold on silver-blue. After a while Julia switched on the radio. It was a phone-in chat show, and today's subject was troublesome children. Ellen didn't pay much attention although she was vaguely aware that her daughter's breathing was becoming more exaggerated. Suddenly Julia's heavily ring-embedded hand snapped off the sound.

'It's Anna.'

Ellen heard without listening. She could have the sheet back on the bed before they came in with her night-time pills. If she were already in bed she could have the blankets pulled up and they wouldn't see that the sheet was wet. There was no need to worry. Nobody would go into the bathroom while she was out. It was all under control. She knew what to do.

'I've no control over her. I don't know what to do.' Julia's voice was cracked. Brittle.

And if someone did find it, couldn't she say she'd spilt something? Her Lucozade. The solution from her tooth mug. Or Arthur could have done it leaning across the bed with the

watering can. It could be anything. It didn't have to be . . . what it was.

'It's Anna, Mother. She's moved in . . .'

She hesitated. Ellen heard her gulp air, like she used to as a child before piano exams.

'Anna has moved in with . . .'

Ellen looked at Julia's hands gripping the steering wheel. The knuckles were white and she still bit her nails.

'Another lesbian, Julia. Surely you know the word? Your daughter's a lesbian.'

They sat on a slatted wooden bench on the pier and listened to boats clinking in the harbour. A fuzzy-haired woman with a cocker spaniel sat at the far end of the bench smoking an enormous cigar. Two men strung bunting from lamp-post to lamp-post, too tight in places, too slack in others. It would soon be the tourist season. Another summer of Mr Whippy ice-creams and brass bands. Of candyfloss and hoopla stalls. Ellen was slipping back in time again. Those things didn't interest modern children. She wondered whether they'd ever interested Julia.

'Was I a good mother?'

Suddenly Ellen had to know. Julia bent to pat the dog as it snuffled past. It growled and lifted an arthritic leg against the bench. A long thin rivulet meandered across the path.

'What? God, I don't know. Does it matter now?'

'Yes. It matters. Was I?'

'I suppose so. Oh, I don't know.'

Julia's eyes followed the dark wet trail as it trickled down into the harbour.

'Mother, what am I going to do about Anna?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing? I've got to do something. That woman's almost as old as I am. She's corrupting an innocent girl.'

'That's a big word, "corrupting". Do you really know what it means?'

Julia looked sharply at Ellen. The dog began to yap.

'For God's sake, Mother, I'm not stupid.'

'No. But maybe I am.'

A small boy scampered past with a red McDonald's balloon. Ellen had a sudden urge to set the balloon free and watch it soar off. Dissolve into nothingness.

'Let her be.'

Julia chattered all the way back. About the neighbours. Her holiday plans. The bridge club. The words tumbled out like the cascade of balls in a lottery machine. And with the same randomness. Ellen watched sailing boats dip and sway on the horizon. She thought of sheets flapping on a line. And one soaking in a bath. She began to doubt that Arthur could be trusted. After all, he had Oldtimers. They turned in the gate of St Anne's Bower. Julia held the car door for her mother and reached to help her up the steps.

'I can manage.'

Ellen slid her hand up the brass rail. The friction burned her palm. She was light-headed before she reached the top but she kept going. Feeling Julia hovering on the step below, she realised for the very first time that her daughter meant well. She wanted to help. But she didn't know what to do. She never had.

'Was I a good mother, Julia?'

She kept her back turned, knowing that whatever the voice said, the eyes would tell the truth. And it was too late for that now.

'Of course you were.'

Julia patted her elbow awkwardly.

'So are you. Let Anna go. We all deserve our freedom. Goodbye.'

'Bye, Mother. See you on Sunday.'

Ellen watched her drive off with her hem caught in the car door. She knew her words had fallen on deaf ears. Ears stuffed with decades of emotional cotton-wool. Julia wouldn't let Anna go. Any more than she'd let Julia go. What did it say about you, having a daughter so tense? So nervy? So unsure of herself? Ellen thought of her own mother. An ice maiden who couldn't bear to touch her only daughter because she'd been such a plain child. In

the silent marbled hallway of St Anne's Bower there was a smell of burning toast.

The bath was empty and the bed had been made with clean sheets. The net curtain cavorted at the wide-open window in an atmosphere tingling with forest-pine spray. A fresh nightie lay across the chair.

Arthur was listening to Handel's *Water Music* when she burst in.

'Traitor! You bloody bloody traitor!'

His hands brushed her sleeves as he reached out to stop her but she darted past on her mission of destruction. The brown armchair toppled backwards and framed grandchildren crashed to the floor. She ripped the linen off the bed and flung it high in the air. It sailed down in a great white parachute, engulfing Arthur. And then she made a beeline for his plants. His beloved pots lined up so proudly along the window-sill.

'Yes!'

'No, not those. Please . . . not Rupert and Cleo and . . .'

He was still trying to disentangle himself.

'Oh yes!'

With a single sweep she sent them flying in all directions and trampled on them, grinding mangled stems and crushed leaves through damp earth into the pale yellow carpet.

'How could you! How could you be a tell-tale!'

With that she flung herself at him, thumping his chest with her fists. It gave her an intoxicating sense of power, pounding out her fury.

'Traitor! Bloody traitor!'

Then suddenly it was over. Her anger evaporated like steam from a kettle gone off the boil and a warm sweet dizziness wafted over her. She felt him catch her wrists as she quivered and twitched before going limp in his arms. Matron was standing in the doorway.

Matron escorts Ellen out of the office to the lift. When it arrives she positions her in the centre and steps back. Ellen watches the closing doors squash Matron into a thin line until all she can see

are a fleshy nose and a row of buttons on a starched white blouse. The lift lurches upwards, leaving Ellen's stomach behind.

Arthur is on his knees, carefully scooping earth back into pots. Ellen hovers at the door, her fingers playing a silent tune on the pleats of her skirt.

'Would you like to help me? I think they were over-full to begin with.'

She kneels creakily beside him. Silent. Unsure.

'They'll grow better this way. More space for the roots.'

She's afraid. Afraid to move.

He takes her hand and gently closes her fingers around the stem of a scarlet pelargonium, guiding it towards a pot.

'Just press the earth down around it.'

The stem is rough. Scratchy. There are tears on the leaves.

'It'll grow again. It has the will to live.'

'Do you?' Ellen hears her own voice. Jagged. Frayed at the edges like pinking-shears.

'Yes.'

He pauses, then lays her hand flat between his palms.

'So do you.'

Without looking up, she says: 'Even with Oldtimers?'

She hears the smile in his voice. Crooked. As it has been ever since the stroke.

'Even with Alzheimer's.'

He blows very lightly along the back of her hand and at last she looks at him.

'I know it wasn't you. The sheet. Matron told me it was Nurse . . .'

He holds a finger to his lips.

'Listen to the plants. Can you hear them rebuilding their energy?'

The wheels of Mrs Nugent's walking-frame squeak along the corridor. It's later than she realised and she has to collect her tea-time tablets from her bedside locker. She likes to be first in the dining-room and today there's a delicious smell of toast. Properly toasted, not soggy in the middle. Mr Kennedy's door is open as she passes. He is kneeling in the middle of the room, holding hands

with that unfriendly woman, Mrs Pristie. They seem to be praying. They'll miss tea if they don't hurry up.

'Oldtimers,' mutters Mrs Nugent as she shuffles on, pushing one foot past the other. 'They all get it in the end.'

JOHN EVANS

Surviving Sophia

Sophia borrowed books and spent Sundays reading, wrapped in her duvet eating chocolates and sipping champagne. Monday mornings she would seek me out, slipping into my office to discuss the relative merits of Paul Theroux and V. S. Naipaul. Perhaps she saw her loneliness reflected in me. Man-child. Struggling to survive on foreign soil. Some of us make it. Some don't. There were no whispers in the churchyard. No stunned silences or quiet tears. I found out over dinner. Matter of fact. *Sophia shot herself. Pass the peas.* And there it is. The difference. It is cold here. All year round.

Some come here by choice. Self-imposed exile. Seduced by place names. Frankfurt, Paris, Brussels, Zurich, Rome. For a time reality escapes the wide-eyed peregrine. Romanticism curbs the inalienable alienness. It is a holiday. Extended. Expatriate. But normality is subjective, reality relative. Clothes get dirty, people have to eat and sleep and fight and make love. Life is blind to location. Sophia's tragedy shocked me into wakefulness. Complacency is a luxury we can ill afford.

This winter has been hard. The snow came in November. German streets become picture postcards. A terrible beauty is born. It is not like Ireland when it snows here. Life does not stop. We trudge workward in snowshoes or slither in salt-streaked cars towards the sanctuary of underground car-parks. Wrapped in winter-woollens, we shiver at tram stops or slip and slide along perished pavements. Minus fifteen degrees at midday. Ireland never prepared us for this. German ladies stand with shovels, waiting to catch the next snowfall.

. . . My car slips sideways into a snowdrift. I gun the engine and try to coax it back onto the road. Impassable, impossible to drive. Germans shunt snow from footpaths onto roads, making driving conditions

hazardous, rather than spoil the beauty of their gardens. Beauty is skin deep, surface. Like this expatriate existence. It looks great, but there is a price to pay . . .

I tried an experiment once. A friend, a fine talker, dominated the conversation. 'Sit on your hands for ten minutes,' I told him after a few pints. 'Go on. Indulge me.' And he did. The action made him tongue-tied. He remained silent until his hands were once again his own. I had taken away his ability to communicate. It is like that here. You can speak the language without possessing the facility to make yourself properly understood. Nuance is everything. To deny the Irish the pleasure of the pun is tantamount to torture. Limited to English speakers, pockets of expatriates expound in dim-lit, dimwit drunkenness on personal odysseys and oddities. This is what life becomes.

So how could she fail to intoxicate me? She fascinated me with stories of South Africa. Her accent captivated me. Transfixed, I would sit listening; afraid to interject in case, by interrupting, I would cause her to stop talking and she would not resume. Me, come recent from my small town, imprisoned by her, small mind opening to wondrous possibilities.

. . . Our fingers touch across the dinner-table. Colleagues, but I let the touch linger. She responds. A lazy leg movement only, but it is a response. One that I can remember, replay behind eyelids before I sleep. Her foot falls gently against mine. I look at her face, but there is not even the faintest glimmer there, nothing to incriminate. She turns to Ernst, sitting beside her, and shares a joke, her hand falling on his arm amid bubbles of silver laughter, long, slender fingers draped in gold are framed against his sleeve. Silly boy, I swallow and feel myself blush, red-faced recognition of the pressure of her foot against mine . . .

Our hands brush against each other in the corridor. We are walking side by side. She pulls away, annoyed. As if I did it on purpose. As if someone might see. Or am I just imagining it? She is taller than I am, and quick to flash a conspiratorial smile in my direction. *We understand each other. Don't we?* Do we? I'm new to this. Conversations take place around me. I recognise words. Not the meaning, just the words. I smile when laughter

erupts, as if I am in on the joke. But she includes me, translates sometimes . . .

'We're talking about tennis.'

'I know. I heard someone say "Steffi".'

'Do you play?'

. . . I do not know whether it is gratitude I feel or something more. I do not pretend to know what she feels. Perhaps it is just pity.

'Would you like to come to dinner?' She is leaning through my office doorway.

'Me? Now?' I am stung. Surprised. I feel a lump rise in my throat. My face is hot and I feel an aching in my loins.

'Not now.' She smiles. 'Tomorrow. I'm having a dinner party. A celebration.'

'What's the occasion?'

'It's the weekend. We have survived another week in this God-awful place. Here, I'll give you my address.'

She sits on my desk, leans over and takes my pen from my hand. I watch her writing, her tongue caught between her white teeth, a smooth thigh exposed where her skirt has fallen open. I look away in case she sees me looking. She folds the paper and hands it to me along with my pen. 'About seven?'

'Yeah. Thanks. I'm looking forward to it.'

'Me too. *Bis Morgen, dann.*'

'Sophia?'

She stops in the doorway and turns to me, brushing her hair behind her ear, a quizzical smile on her lips, an eyebrow raised. 'Huh?'

'I . . .' My tongue trips itself. Now that I have stopped her I cannot think of anything to say. 'Nothing. Just . . . Thanks.' I feel myself blush again and bite the inside of my lower lip, angry.

'You're welcome.' Her voice is smooth and low, almost feline. She winks at me, slow, suggestive. I cannot tell if she is mocking me.

I shiver when she leaves the office. 'Christ, man,' I tell myself, 'get a grip.'

*

We are left alone, talking poetry. I trot out tired clichés, conscious of my clay-bound legacy. She tilts her head to drain her wineglass, her blond hair falling across her shoulder. She is dangerously close to me on her sofa, an arm thrown casually towards me along the backrest. Her breasts move like dolphins rolling under the black transparency of her blouse. My tongue feels thick; my accent is clumsy in my ears. Pseudo-intellectual, plagiariser, my thoughts stolen from fragmented lectures, I am a schoolboy, anxious to impress, inept. But there is a bond between us, curious gossamer.

She stretches in the small hours, arching her long, lithe body. 'I think it's time for bed.'

'I'm sorry.' I rise. Embarrassed. 'Was I boring you? It's getting late, I should be going.'

A single syllable escapes her, like a bubble, floating up between us. Fragile. It may move beyond my reach if I do not attempt to intercept it. *Why?* It is a question, simply formed. It trips me where I stand.

In bed she takes me to Africa. Safari. Underneath the sheet I am transported. The darkness is her canvas.

'In the middle of the night the elephants came. We huddled in the blackness of our tents, trembling. Clinging to each other. Terrified. What if they should walk on us? We heard them trumpet, felt the ground shake beneath their weight. Great lumbering beasts. One moved between the tents and I could hear the guy-lines ping. I thought of the tent collapsing, imagined myself suffocating in its folds, imagined the life being crushed from me. The moon threw shadows on the walls of the tent, like some grotesque puppet show.

'At dawn we emerged, like survivors of an earthquake. It was raining. The camp site was pock-marked, as if we had been attacked by heavy artillery. The water gathered in their footprints. "What did they want?" I asked Joey.

'He grinned at me, his teeth dazzling against his blue skin, his dark eyes filled with humour. "You no bury your scraps, Ma'am. I tell you bury your scraps. They hungry. Smell the food. You bury your scraps tonight, no?"

'We buried the scraps that night. Apparently we were perfectly safe,

although it didn't seem like that at the time. An elephant won't walk on a tent. To him it is a rock. Elephants are not great rock climbers. Apparently.'

I picture her entombed. Foetus, curled inside a rock, her hands clamped to her ears, her mouth open, screaming. She cannot block out the noise. Turbulent tonnes create waves of sound around her. She is powerless, a blade of grass protected by a shell. But the shell is fragile, illusory. Eggshell. One false step . . .

The elephants are restless.

We become a couple. Strange. I am absorbed by her. She fills my thoughts in every waking moment. She fills my arms in sleep.

'You mustn't tell anybody,' she tells me, her chin resting on my chest, her hand smoothing my hair out of my eyes.

'Why not?' I am puzzled. Afraid that she is ashamed of me.

'Just don't. Keep this for us.' She smiles, lifting her head and pinching my chest. 'Don't look so worried. You'll learn. People here want to know everything about you. They want to live through you. If you don't hold something in reserve, they take it all.'

'Sophia, I think you are seriously deranged.'

'Maybe.' She is suddenly serious. There is a strange intensity to her, as if this means everything. 'But don't tell them. Trust me.'

'Okay.' I put my arms around her and kiss her forehead. 'You're the boss.'

She helped me through my first winter, warming me at night, protecting me. She took me to Heidelberg and we had a snowball fight on the Philosopher's Walk. At Christmas we drank *Glühwein* at stalls and bought each other presents. I decorated a tree in her apartment while she was shopping. She cried when she saw it and hugged me so tightly that I thought my eyeballs would pop. And all the time we kept our secret. In company we were polite to one another. Friendly, almost. But nobody suspected. She wanted it like that and I allowed it.

Sunday. We stand with steaming cups of coffee on my balcony and

watch the last of the snow surrender to pale spring sunshine. 'Let's go to Laveno next weekend.'

The car swallows miles of motorway, exploding through the Continent. Plunging through the Alps, we emerge from the Gothard tunnel, triumphant, into blazing sunshine. Cosmopolites, we cross another border. Into Italy. Later we will sit on a different balcony, four hundred miles from our adopted home, and marvel once again at the magnificence of Lago Maggiore. As the sun sets over the car ferry's orange tumble towards Switzerland, we sip wine and I am content. I do not think to ask what she is thinking, what demersal demons swim in the soft sadness of her blue eyes.

'I love you, Sophia.' Impetuous youth. I am blind. Dazzled by her.

'Oh Christ.' She groans, turning away from me. 'Why did you have to say that?'

'But I do.'

'No, you just think you do.' When she turns back there are tears in her eyes. She lifts herself onto an elbow, pushing her hair out of her eyes and gathering the sheet around her breasts. 'How old are you?'

'Twenty-two.' Defiant now. *And so?*

'Christ. A baby. I'm forty-three. I'm old enough to be your mother.'

'I don't care.' I bite my lower lip and try to stop my chin from trembling. It is as if she has reached into my stomach and gripped my slippery innards with blood-slick hands. 'I love you.'

'Don't be stupid. There is no future.' She climbs out of bed, bleached blond hair falling down her long white back to touch her tapered waist, her buttocks small and firm over slender legs that go on for ever.

'Sophia . . .'

I close my eyes and see hers again, exquisite pain as she gasps beneath me. I feel myself explode inside her. We are lucky. We are two. We can survive here. *Sophia.* But she is gone; the bathroom door stands closed behind her like an exclamation mark.

There is no future. She is back inside her shell.

She caddied for her father on weekends and holidays, a way for

both of them to avoid her mother's drinking, until a bird flew into the trajectory of his second to the long par-five fifteenth at the White Sands Country Club. The bird's head and the ball came to rest side by side in the light rough. Sophia ran to its crumpled body. The left wing was folded into itself like an accordion, the right still twitching on the blood-speckled grass. Her shoulders began to shake and she felt an inexplicable sense of loss. Her father, irritated, tapped his fairway wood on the grass and looked to his playing partner who scratched his head and agreed to a free drop. *Damnedest thing.* She heard her father's voice. 'Sophia, throw that thing into the trees.' She lifted it, repulsed yet tender, and carried it into the copsewood where she laid it down and smoothed its damaged wing, then covered it with dry grass and leaves. She never caddied for her father again.

It was she who found him, his silver boot-buckles swinging above his golf trophies, his tongue black and bloated, like spoiled fruit spilling from his mouth. He left no note, redundant. Taxation irregularities, an alcoholic wife, the tumour at the base of his spine. To his fourteen-year-old daughter all irrelevant. He must have known she cried in the darkness of her room, cursing him, the father she had idolised, grown cruel. He knew she couldn't love him any more.

'Don't you want children?' She moves her hand away from mine on the table. Even mittened, it is as if the contact would be too public. 'I'm too old, you know.' We sit outside, cold April. The waiter brings hot chocolate with rum. People rush by, gift-wrapped. We are calm at the centre of this. I sit, stony-faced. 'Curious child.' Her teeth flash white as she shakes her head. 'Speak to me for Christ's sake.'

'What do you want me to say, Sophia?'

'Admit it. There is no future. Can't you just accept that?'

'No. I mean . . . It doesn't matter.' I am too tired for this.

'Of course it matters.' She snaps at me, seeing an opening.

'Why are you doing this?' The hurt in my eyes causes her to stop. She sucks a breath through pursed lips. We sit in silence again.

'Don't go.' She takes my hand now.

'It's only for a few days.'

'I don't want you to go. People are always leaving me.'

'Come with me.'

'To Ireland? I think not,' she snorts. 'I've been there. It rained.'

'It happens.' I withdraw my hand, lifting the cup to my lips. The chocolate burns my mouth, making my eyes water. A tram rolls by, white faces pressed against the moist windows.

'I think it's going to rain here too.' She watches dark clouds gather above us.

'Jesus. Are we reduced to weather forecasts now? Suit yourself. I have to go.' I stand, hoisting my bag onto my shoulder, ready to leave for the airport. A tear slips from the corner of her eye and runs unchecked along her cheek. 'For God's sake, Sophia. Just tell me what you want from me.'

'I need you to be my friend.'

'I am your friend. I love you.'

'Don't.'

'I . . . Look . . . The tram's coming. I have to go. I'll see you in a few days. Okay?'

'Okay.'

When I bend to kiss her she turns away, brushing at her eye with the back of her hand. I hang above her like that, not sure of what to say.

'Go on,' she says, 'you'll miss your tram.'

I walk across the square and buy a ticket. When I look back she is fumbling in her purse for change, the waiter standing next to her with his hand extended. The tram moves between us, blocking my view. People push around me and I am swept forward in a rush for seats. When I sit down I look for her, but she is gone. All the tables are empty now. The waiter is collapsing umbrellas near the café door.

'My father shot a lion once. I think I was six. Or seven. It had killed some cattle. The headman collected him at dawn. He came to my room to kiss me goodbye, his rifle cradled in his arm. I think he must have been afraid. He sat on the edge of my bed and rubbed my forehead with the back of his fingers, then leaned down and kissed my cheek. "Be good," he said, "do what your mother tells you." He stopped in the

doorway and looked back at me, dozing on top of the covers. It was as if he was going to war.

'When they returned that night, the lion was stretched across the back of his jeep. Flies buzzed around its face, around the red gash left by my father's bullet in its temple. I had never seen a lion up close before. I remember the size of its teeth, its whiskers, the filth matted in its mane. The smell. It was as if some terrible injustice had tarnished its existence. But it was still beautiful. Majestic. Even in death, the creature was radiant and proud. Dignified.

'My father was a hero. With everyone but me. Where they saw courage, I saw cowardice overcome by duty. His shortcomings were amplified by the nobility of the beast that he had killed. Soon afterwards he sent me to boarding-school in Johannesburg.'

When I got back from Ireland she was gone. She did not resign. She phoned from Brussels on Monday morning to say that she would not be back. She had a new job, interpreting for the European Commission. It was the talk of the corridor for days. But she had hidden our affair well. No one suspected. No one sympathised. No one knew my pain but me.

I tried to contact her, but she refused to return my calls. I drove to Brussels and parked outside her office building. When she emerged I followed her home along rue de la Loi and watched her lock her car, collect fliers from her mailbox, and enter her apartment. I got as far as the door, ran my finger across the letters of her name, stencilled on a gold plate, and almost pressed the doorbell. But she didn't want to see me. I knew that. I sat back into my car, not knowing what else to do. I woke at dawn and drove back to Frankfurt, feeling sheepish and lonely, knowing it was over.

We had been together for just five months.

I learn to survive alone here, Sophia. I become your lion, noble in defeat. I cannot talk to anyone about you. Who would understand? 'Deluded child,' they would say. 'How could she love you?' Besides, this pain is mine. You were right. It is a bond between us, something to be nurtured. It sets me apart. It is not for them.

The summer comes, for real now. I do not have to burrow

through a mountain to find light at the end of the tunnel. At night I sit on my balcony and watch electrical storms dance above the Odenwald, a gin-and-tonic in my hand. I am older now, Sophia. I am wiser. I am separate, like you. And I am learning.

The wind burned my face today when I was cycling. I can feel the skin stretched tight across my nose. The muscles in my arms and legs ache. I stood looking at myself in the mirror after my shower and noticed wrinkles around my eyes for the first time. I know what you would say. You would look at me, an eyebrow raised, your long legs crossed, holding a cold glass full of ice and lemon away from you, your little finger cocked like a question mark. 'Aren't you a little young to be having a mid-life crisis?' And you would sprinkle laughter in my direction, infectious. That is what you would say. I am smiling now, thinking about it. You were right, Sophia. I took it all too seriously. Perhaps I should have just taken it. I loved you. I didn't have to tell you. You knew. It was the telling that made it too hard to accept.

November. I have been here for a year. Thoughts of her are few and far between now. I have not had another lover, the need diminishes. There is time. I am young, even though I have had another birthday. I thought perhaps a card, but no. She is vanished. Friends come for dinner. I call them friends, but what is it she said? They are like lazy squirrels in winter. *You've got to watch your nuts with them, boy.* I carve the meat, pour the wine. I have become adept. I cope admirably. A veneer she would approve of. *That's it. Don't let the bastards get to you.* I even joke in German now.

'A toast to me, ladies and gentlemen. One year, successfully navigated.'

Some of us make it. Some don't.

'Where is Jules now? I heard he got a contract in Stockholm.'

'Is Tony still in Frankfurt? God I haven't seen him in ages.'

'I heard Sophia shot herself!'

Time stops. A spoon is suspended, gravy drop hanging in mid-air. I hear myself breathing. Christ, I didn't hear this. It couldn't be. I must have imagined it. 'Sophia Collins?' My voice sounds strangely normal, calm. The question comes clinical. Detached.

'Yes. Hadn't you heard? She shot herself in Brussels. They found the body two weeks later when a neighbour noticed the smell. She always was a bit strange, though. Wasn't she? Imagine. Shot herself.'

'When?'

'Oh, months ago, darling. I thought everybody knew.'

And they talk about her, as if she is a story in a newspaper, a disembodied photograph. Tabloid fodder. All the gory details. What kind of gun? How did she do it? Where did she shoot herself? But I know. A red gash. A single gunshot to the temple.

That night I dream of her. The touch of her cold hand outside the blanket, the warmth of her bare buttocks against me, the softness of her breast in my palm. I can smell her hair, feel its softness wrapped around my fingers, see her shoulder, blue in the moonlight creeping through the window. I see her turning, mouth open slightly, inviting, her eyelids fluttering in the half-dark. She takes me in her hand and I feel myself grow hard in her grip. She climbs on top of me and hooks her feet behind my knees, forcing me inside her. Her fingers touch my cheek, her tongue searching ~~inside my mouth.~~ We rock slowly, an aching tenderness between us. When she lifts her head her hair falls around me like a veil, our faces close together. We are safe together in her tent, the elephants tiptoeing around us. And in my dream I whisper to her, 'Sophia. I love you.' And she smiles. She nods. *I know.*

JUDY KRAVIS

The Wall

These fifty years on the side of Kelly's hill had given Dan a taste for apocalypse. He could see it so well. One stormy day the dam up-river would crack and the house would slip down in its great career towards the river, dragging with it Matt's house above, then Elder sister's house below, as well as younger sister Joan across the road, to say nothing of brother Paddy down by the river whose house would suffer all sorts of dire shock as the flood of rubble from above met the flood of the river below. The storm would sweep about and scoop them up with their dwellings, their vehicles and their garden ornaments round a swelling bend in the river towards the open sea, their feet in the air. This was his nightmare and sometimes his dream.

As a Kelly, Dan was handy, he was solid. He went about his day a silent and a working man, and at night he closed down early. He'd built his own house with his father and his brothers in 1954. In turn they'd built three houses as the three older brothers married. Paddy chose the spot down by the river and there gave rise to a smooth dozen children. Dan, first to build on the real escarpment of the hill – gradient of one in nine it had to be, shaly slope in front and solid rock behind – reached five children. Matt built above Dan, even tighter into the rock behind and the road in front, whence he and Mrs Matt had four main boys and then the two youngest, a boy and a girl.

The fourth house, a new one for Nanna and Granda – since the old one where they'd all been reared wasn't fit for sixpence any more – they built next to the old house on the only bit of flat land they had, the spot the first Kellys had chosen, Nanna's Nanna that had been. The fourth and youngest brother Tim stayed on in the old house. He liked the quiet process of dilapidation; he knew how to humour it. After Nanna and Granda died the new

bungalow was found to be subsiding and, although the Kelly grandchildren partied in it for a while, they eventually ceded to the swallows, and to Tim.

Paddy, Dan and Matt you couldn't keep indoors. Tim you couldn't get out, at least not any further than the rowan tree in front of the house, where you'd catch him looking out where he'd long stood and long gazed down the path of least resistance. Tim wasn't handy, he had education, he was a geography teacher. His sole outings were field trips with his boys and girls to a field somewhere, a river valley, a plateau, a tectonic plate. He'd usually bring something back, a stone or an old bit of wood. Education makes you strange, Kellys thought, after you've your letters and your times tables, it makes the most ordinary things go strange, like a word said over and over. Tim would have been better off with a trade and a bit of upkeep like the rest of us, a pair of secateurs and a stout ladder.

Tim had looked after Nanna and Granda in their last and his middle years. Their looking after him and his looking after them so merged and muted that there did not come to pass a Mrs Tim through the portals of his heart. Creeper ran lightly from the old house to the new bungalow and back again. The laurels by the garage grew tall, their black branches thickening as the garage doors shrank, first into planks, then into ridges, then into strings.

All Kellys except Tim had exactly one move in their lives, a crucial step up from the river or sideways along it, accompanied by various erosions and constructions and downright attacks on the terrain as they found it. In certain Kelly sectors it might have been said that Dan, though a sound man with a sound house, was, after Tim, the least proud of his patch. He concreted round the house after it was finished, but after that he did little. His garden mingled with the hill, the road and Elder sister's orchard, which dropped away below. There was very poor definition in any direction. Dan hadn't hedged or planted so you'd notice; he scythed a bit most years, kept back the biggest weeds and watched with boredom, then fascination, as the smaller ones continued to grow.

The two sisters, Elder and Joan, from either side of the road did expert front-of-house on Kelly's Hill. They always had a fleeting

reason to be out. Elder sister clipped her hedges. Joan had plaster leprechauns and donkeys; she kept the grass tidy around their feet. She dried the washing on the front rails and stood out polishing the karate cups her middle boy had won; she kept them this side of the net curtains in the porch. Mr Elder – who died early, of a stroke – and Mr Joan also came from building families in the next townland. Mr Joan was generally outside too, sitting in the Fiesta with the door open, one leg in, one leg out of the car, reading the paper.

This question of the right spot on the hill was moot with older Kellys. No one was sure who had it. Even the old house was a bit dark and damp, facing north and only slightly west. Then there was the ill luck of this or that spot on the hill, the awkwardness of the slope, the shaly rock, the problem of keeping a hold, the machines you'd need, the hard work. The younger generation did not inherit these preoccupations. They just needed enough of a spot to park a car and a hose to wash her down with. The boys took early to cars and spent their adolescence scouring and screeching a succession of bangers round the hill. Parts of the cars gravitated across the road and into the ditch, the water finding new paths around chassis and steering wheel, slowly reshaping the history of vehicles as Matt and his boys had so far played it out, together with washing machines and spare parts going right back to Nanna's Nanna who'd been mad for the gadgets for as long as anyone could remember.

Matt and his boys lived on the crest of an exchange: a car for a van for a truck for a JCB with a good few loads of sand and cement thrown in. A prime mover in tribal business, anything you needed, Matt could get you a good deal. There was always a stroke to pull, a vehicle on the move. Matt's hillworks, which had happened along with his diversification into grandchildren and motor boats, had been a success. He had dug back into the rock for more room, an extension to the house and more parking space for the vehicles. Something explosive and secure, the wall of hard rock behind the house was a signal triumph. The two sisters felt this was a tidy Kelly house. No weeds grew out of rock and Mrs Matt, though she kept herself to herself, ran a tight washing line. The line of cars the boys brought in became more stylish by the

late eighties, Mercedes next to motor cruiser next to four-wheel drive. Import-export, you know. Matt was mainly into the JCB then. There was good work in clearing sites for houses; people were digging into hills and river banks, they were raising out of the marsh and levelling all over.

By 1980 more than half the younger generation had moved off the hill, many of them married and settled in estates on the flatlands outside town. Now that the family was thinning out it felt more like a tribe; the outlying forces of children and grandchildren made it more than numerically powerful; other lands meant other infiltration: a random Kelly on the hill was the visible flank of a veritable crowd. They kept watch and kept up the property. Except Tim, of course, who could have had a field trip around the creeper which had made the old house and the bungalow a single fuzzy summer home for swallows. The creeper ran graceful and searching from the gable end of the new to the gable end of the old. It was a dry jungle in July, festive with bird shit.

Looking across the hill one day, Dan saw Tim standing outside too, looking over the river, out south-west. A confusing time it was, with Kellys yawning and spawning every which way. Tim's – bazaar – over there didn't help. A jungle full of air and nests. And Matt, pushing back further into the rock face to build a new workshop, his new truck a monster with a gashing grin on its face tipped forward each night over Dan's backyard. Dan was rattled; he couldn't imagine living anywhere else but Kelly's hill. He was a walking encyclopaedia of its gradients and its faults. The cataclysm that nestled in his brain stirred: a great rainy season would come and crack the dam and sweep them all away down river towards the open sea. He could hear the roar and thwack of hardware on the move.

He'd build a wall, he'd make a place from which to watch, his pulpit, his cower box, his snug. It would have to be hefty, banking up the one-in-nine slope on the roadside, maybe fifteen feet high, then gradually less along the boundary with Elder sister's orchard. It would have to be tight.

Dan Kelly began his wall in 1984. He dug out the two lines of foundation, one along the road and the other perpendicular along

the boundary with Elder sister's orchard. She frowned. She frowned as a child already, and when she was married, even more as a widow, as if these successive conditions made her angrier and still less understanding; she frowned when she was trimming her hedge and again when she'd finished. Whatever d'you want with a wall? She had only a hedge between her and the outside world; and another between her and the inside world.

Dan laid his first blocks with great care, as if this were the last day of his apprenticeship and a clean slate ahead. He had the time at last, and how. He had the time and time again, in blocks of concrete two foot by one foot by five inches. Rough to the touch. He had new gloves, top quality. Overalls aplenty. A clean slope of hill. He had his work cut out. Good.

For the first few months of building, Dan was righteous, Dan was out at eight each morning, save stormy weather. The Great Wall of Bunnakista, everyone was saying, and he felt warm inside. Even when the cracks appeared at the corner, tiny filaments working upwards and outwards like rivers on an aeroplane window, he felt warm. The wall was settling. Dan stood and looked out, several times a day, south and west. He saw nothing new but every day he could see further.

Through the mid-eighties Dan babied those cracks, but by the winter of 1987 they had spread to the top of the wall. Maybe it had been the hot summer. He went out each morning to check. Paddy muttered about landshifts and reinforcements. Dan was sure the wall would hold, the cracks would go no further. But the angle started to veer down the hill. The Leaning Tower, they were calling it. He had to reinforce, fill in, tie on, and these manoeuvres, with the bad weather that autumn, had him busy for longer than he'd thought. On New Year's night someone spray-painted HELP! onto the road side of the wall. There were rumours it was Dan himself did it. He put on a quick wash of white but you could still read it, bigger and diffuse, in the shape of the wash. As rain streaks thickened and darkened it read as HELL!

Through 1988 he did minute filling with a new bonding agent, going round the cracks in sequence, starting again as soon as he reached the end. Paddy was derisive down his trowel as he unearthed an old low wall at the front of his house and planted it

with annuals and rockery items. Paddy in his retirement painted and repainted his house, with a half-merry half-smoothing look which had taken him across continents of interior walls in his working life.

Over the road Joan repainted her front fence and kept an eye on Dan. Her tiny front garden with its neat post-and-rail fence had an air of a pony nursery, guarded by the leprechauns and the laden donkeys in bright red and green and white. Mr Joan spent much of his retirement in the Fiesta, the door open, reading the paper. Elder sister was not saying much, clipped, self-clipping.

By summer 1989 Dan had all the cracks filled in and they seemed to be holding. With hindsight the next three years were the dark years. Dan did not touch his wall. It was still at last but he felt betrayed, and threatened, as if something were about to fall on him, a cabin trunk crashing down the stairs and the initials painted on it weren't even his. He grew more silent, spent the warm season on an upright chair looking out south and west.

All kinds of paroxysms shook Kellys in the outreach in those years: marriages, illnesses, christenings and funerals. The older generation went to visit the younger in the flatlands and learned the ways of the semi- and the concrete-walled garden, the sensor light. Dan remembered none of these events though he was present at all of them, crammed into one or other of the front rooms. His lone memory was the view from the angle of his wall, as if he'd been painted in now, unwilling twin to Tim, who was often outside his house too, looking out south and west.

In the Indian summer of 1993 Dan found his feet again. Maybe it was the September sunshine one evening on Tim's creeper flaming across the road, the whole thing ablaze like a picture in a story-book. The cracks were well settled. The wall was looking streaked. It was time to resurface. With a passion no Kelly had shown since adolescence, he rough-plastered, he pebble-dashed and he painted. Down the road slope and the orchard slope he created a careful stagger every four feet, stepping down eighteen inches from the ground. He held in the staggers with metal reinforcements, then painted them three times white, then twice black, to contrast with the white of the rest of the wall. He dug a

drain all along and then planted a row of rabbit ears along it. Some of them were slightly run over by cars.

Now he'd got the wall secure he could look to his patch. He began work on the railings round the top of the wall. It was a finishing touch he'd always had in mind. He'd delayed the very top of the wall until he was sure about the railings, their height and the way they'd be fixed. There would also be of course a new gate, and gateposts. He'd give the house a coat of paint too while he was at it. Maybe he'd put in a sunken garden, a fountain, a tunnel; or do gargoyles. Elder sister would make a gargoyle, with hedge clippers. And Mrs Matt, with washing line. Then he could fashion Mr Joan in the Fiesta, Mrs Joan washing down her leprechauns, Paddy painting the porch, Mrs Dan holding his mug of tea, Tim ablaze with creeper.

By 1993 the older Kellys were at fever pitch. Except Tim of course. No one had been in the old house for ten years so no one actually knew what Tim did, though some of the grandchildren had wandered in and come out dusty and thoughtful. Matt planted shrubs, about fifty of them on the slope down to the road from his house. It was shaly earth but some of the shrubs caught on. Joan bought two eagles for her gateposts and painted them hospital grey. She put plastic bottles full of water in the garden among her plants to keep off the birds. Paddy followed the trends in house improvement as observed by Mrs Paddy in *Woman's Realm*. He had put in new windows twice already, and painted the house and the garage every two years. His garden veered towards the naked, one new variegated tree bought in the mid-eighties only making it more naked again. Paddy trimmed back the plants till they hunted two by two, small annuals in wells every few feet. He tended them so constantly they grew like mutants in laboratories, an isolated aster here and there as rigid as the stones out of which it rose. After that he stood about in front of the wall and waved at passing cars. He waved in a slow, smooth, plastering motion.

As you get older you start to go for the total effect, Dan realised, not just a house, not just a garden, not just a wall, you're talking about firming up your monument. Tim had told him once about a house built by a postman who'd spent years of post rounds

collecting stones to make a palace; even after his death he lived in it, like the Pharaohs in their pyramids and all those tourists in awe. Somewhere in France. You had to work with what was there.

Dan was working in a land of soft turf, shaly rock and abandoned cars. Matt had chucked full thirteen of them into the ditch until his grandchildren had told him he wasn't supposed to do that now there was a hole in the ozone layer. The thirteen were still there, decomposing in the tranquil way of metal alloy from above Matt's house nearly down to Joan's, from the early Morris-a-Thousand to the more recent Protons and Croutons. Dan could see bits of them sticking through the rich streamside vegetation, with here and there the darkness of the earlier generation of Nanna's gadgets. A spectral toaster was caught on the bumper of a miniature fork-lift truck. An old kitchen mangle put still waters in flood.

Dan started at the angle of the wall, at the bottom, working one day up the road slope and one day up the orchard slope so that he progressed evenly up and along the two surfaces. First he hack-sawed pieces of car off the wrecks in the ditch, then cut them into small pieces and filed them smooth. Then he painted them in silver rust-proof paint and began to lay them like slates on his wall, tacking each piece on with masonry pins, starting from the angle and proceeding in odd rhythms: now north up the hill, now east along Elder sister's orchard. He did not listen to criticism on this one. He just continued. He continued for years. The total effect was singing, more upward than onward, more dream than nightmare. The silver paint glistened sweetly through the last years of the century as he placed and replaced and repainted.

Matt's two youngest were thinking of tunnelling into the rock and growing mushrooms. Dan's eldest was thinking of coming back to the hill and building above Matt; everyone said he was crazy, the rock was sheer up there, sheer. Mr Joan died one day at the wheel of the Fiesta and Elder sister moved in with Joan. Tim startled them all by upping at the age of sixty-four and going off to live in France with a geography teacher he'd been writing to for years called Jean-Marie. No one was clear whether Jean-Marie was a man or a woman and they didn't pursue it. Let that creeper

grow, were his only instructions to the family. He put it in writing, with an official stamp. And in the end they were grateful.

Kelly's hill as was, became Kelly's art park. The old creepered house was a bird sanctuary. There were by the turn of the century as many art parks as golf courses in Munster. Kellys didn't succeed in buying the bit of road off the Council – which had been Matt's plan – but Dan got great praise for his silver wall. Tourists stopped to photograph it. Mrs Dan learned to bask in it. Paddy directed traffic at the bottom of the hill, and turned some of his garden into a car-park, which the Art Parks Commission declared counter to the general interest but did not press the point. Joan and Elder sister did teas in the orchard on fine days, the fine cut of the grass coming into its own beneath the scattering of tables with their clip-on cloths. Matt had scooped out individual terraces for the tables with his JCB and made little paths between them. Elder sister's house was now Kelly's Tea Room. Tourists expected to see Dan, paintbrush in hand, peering into the silver. They did not want him to look up for the photograph.

ORLA MURPHY

Travel

'Well you can't have everything –'

Her mother's last words had been spoken more to herself than to Mary, the tone offhand as if even regret had become uninteresting. And then, without apparent irony, she had left everything to Mary: the small house they had shared during her nine years of illness, the quarterly stipend, the cat, the silence.

Two months later Mary stood, cigarette in hand, not seeing the backyard, the kitchen behind her folded in on itself, her mother's apron still behind the door, the library books piled like a spiral staircase. Geraldine, her neighbour, had dropped in to admire the newly painted bathroom. But what was there to say about grey-on-grey? She checked her perfect hair in the mirror. Mary could see them both: Geraldine the sharp golden one and behind her Mary, an amoeba wavering, never quite attaining or holding any shape. Embarrassed, she'd pounced on the laundry basket, dragging it aside to show off the nearly new carpet, and uncovered a pock-marked stain the shape of Australia. The taxi call saved them. Geraldine slung her mobile and briefcase onto the seat. 'I'll send a card from Paris. You can stick it in the bathroom. It'll brighten the place up a bit. Ciao!' With a clash of gold bangles she was gone.

Mary groped for another fag. Empty. She shrugged on her jacket and set off for the shops. By now Geraldine would be half-way to Paris to arrange the opening of a new branch with 'the guys from Buenos Aires', while Mary was going shopping. Shopping and . . . ? but that was Geraldine's hobby: the 'guys from Buenos Aires'. Would they be wearing cowboy boots? And spurs? That'd be good for the sheets. She grinned, then pushed her chin down into her collar and tightened her jacket against the chill of February and public disapproval.

Passing the Travel Agent she looked, then glanced away. At the newsagent's she fingered a magazine on exotic holidays, but when she saw the price she dropped it and fled. Closing the shop door she noticed a reflection in the glass, a white speck, moving in a slow straight line. She turned to the sky and could see the aeroplane, miles up where the sun always shines, and felt a shock of longing. Oh to be somewhere else. To be someone else.

She went back to the Travel Agent and trawled the shelves for leaflets. At home she made tea and filleted her catch. It yielded lakes and mountains, scented forests, pearly waves on Man Friday shores; bougainvillaea, orchids, flame trees. It mentioned Paris, of course, and Buenos Aires, Venice, Machu Picchu, the Blue Nile and the Sargasso Sea. She swam, she dreamt, she dived. When daylight failed, she surfaced to a reproachful cat and an unopened packet of cigarettes. Shaking out the sand-coloured Brekkies into Felix's enamel dish, she saw only the pyramids. She looked at the prices, then sighed, knowing what she'd always known: the world is a cornucopia for the rich.

That night she slept badly. She dreamt endlessly, or so it seemed when she woke with the last visions slipping beyond her recollection, leaving only one thing, one colour, pressing so heavy on her memory she could almost smell it: a deep dark red. The colour of? She scrabbled under the bed for the magazine. The item was so small she could hardly find it but the photograph – how could she have forgotten? It showed the interior of a tent in India. A woman sat among huge cushions and all around her, hanging from points beyond the lens, were carpets. Close up they might look like jewels or stained glass or meadows of flowers, but in the photograph they became a sky of cinnamon and rose: palpably, aromatically warm.

She cut out the photograph and pasted it on the bathroom wall. On that grey wilderness it looked lost. She flapped through the magazine and found a photo montage of elephants decorated for a festival, some camels haughtily posed before a dull pebbly desert and one thin man charming one fat cobra. Only the elephants qualified for bathroom immortalisation. As she lay in the bath she could see them through the steam above the taps, their great jewelled heads seeming to nod or even to bow gently in unison.

Then the photograph curled over and flopped into the water. Sighing, she heaved herself up and, wrapped in a towel, she sat on the edge of the bath, patting the photograph dry. Damned paste.

The following morning, while she ate toast and contemplated the pile of useless magazines, she heard the dull snarl of the dustbin lorry, edging between the parked cars on the road. She watched as the men dragged bins across the pavement and slung the contents towards the lorry's revolving maw. She was too late to contribute her small offering, but the monster was happy pulverising gobbets of food, toys, boxes, packets, tubes, tins, newspapers. And magazines. She saw the pages windmill to destruction with flashes of colour like signals for help.

Damascus in suburbia!

She did not wait until the lorry had gone and the last lid had been dropped through a hedge or flung aside to roll into the path of an oncoming pensioner. She went to the bathroom and blu-tacked the elephants to the wall. She admired Shahila (now named), still faithfully holding to her place by the mirror. She shunted the pile of rejects into the front room and banged the door on them. She fed Felix and watched as he lowered his quivering whiskers towards the dish. Unable to control her impatience, she phoned the corporation. The rubbish collection for the next day was in the adjoining area.

Before dawn, she wheeled her high nelly through the hall for Bellevue Park, Bellevue Drive and Bellevue Hill. This older suburb was completely quiet. She met only one jogger whose gasps alerted her before he rounded a corner, and one milk float whose stealthy drone she might have missed if the milk crates' jangle and thump had not given it away. With rubber gloves, she peeled back the secrets of the well-to-do and swiftly became impatient of the unfinished cosmetics, uneaten food, unopened books in her search. Two-car houses had been the most fruitful. Is waste a proof of wealth? she wondered, eyeing a silk chemise with one small tear. After Bellevue Park and Bellevue Drive her saddlebag was full and not a light had come on, not a dog had barked. She turned towards Bellevue Hill and saw the fluorescent bulk of a postman striding down. She went home.

Her excursion had made a small but definite contribution to her

bathroom. *Interiors* and *Homes and Gardens* provided the richest harvest. Supplements yielded much, though on inferior paper. Brilliant wings of colour blossomed around Shahila's tent. Encouraged, Mary cycled further every night. She conquered Bellevue Hill and its newer siblings, Bellevue Downs, Bellevue Crescent and Bellevue Close. Her bicycle grew panniers and a front basket. Her shoulders sprouted a backpack. She grew great muscles in her legs and a faultless sense of the richer seams of colour photographs.

In a few weeks, her bathroom was complete. To celebrate, she ran a full bath with lavender oil and floating candles. She set a joss stick in the tooth mug and turned the transistor down. With the help of a glass of mulled wine she travelled Kashmir, Goa, Rajasthan . . . the whole dazzling continent. Shahila and the elephants were her steadfast companions. She was certain, after a couple of glasses, that the tranny was playing 'The Sitar's Twenty Greatest Hits'.

Her bedroom, by contrast, was cold, dull and, now that she had conquered India, intolerably confined. It needed a theme to free it from its dinginess. She returned to the front room, where the tide of magazines had risen two feet. She set about finding new territory. It was impossible; she had cut swathes through all the continents that were displayed near or on the reverse of her first crusade.

There followed weeks of cycling; cycling every night, earlier and earlier to escape the relentlessly advancing dawn and its tiresome cohorts of humanity. She had decided on outer space – moons and stars, comets and planets – as suitable for night and sleep. It proved an impossible choice. She had slept through the weekly collections and now it was too late; an ocean of magazines churned about the front room, mutilated and abandoned in her plundering frenzy. And still only the ceiling of her bedroom had been covered and that thanks to a quick tour of the dentist's waiting room which had yielded the *National Geographic* (August and November 1968) and a whole year of the *New Scientist*. The latter was a Black Hole: zillions wasted on moon-shots and then the illustrations skimped. She eyed the Library: all those encyclopaedias. But the weight and the risk. She forced the front-room

door open enough to squeeze around it and faced the truth: she would have to abandon Space. She would have to lower her sights to something more earthly. Somewhere small and common, like Europe.

In the backyard a blackbird tapped its beak on the cat's dish: tappety-tap, clickety-click. Mary closed her eyes. Castanets!

The celestial ceiling could remain. The rest of her room would be a chiaroscuro of shadowed courtyards, plazas shimmering at noon and dancers flaunting their plumage. She bought a cheap tape of flamenco music and played it on her Walkman, acquired in a reckless moment from an open BMW in Bellevue Mews. Hectic rhythms urged her on as she rode once more and much more than once more, into the night. She could judge the possibilities of any house without dismounting. Well-ordered areas had waste sorted into categories: wet/dry; organic/inorganic: her booty was often pristine, bearing not a mashed carrot nor a congealed chip anywhere.

The front room was no longer accessible. The hall had begun to fill up.

She was putting the finishing touches to Madrid Cathedral (a night study with candles), when she heard a knock at the front door. A redheaded fellow of about thirty stood there proffering a plastic crate.

'Any old paper?' he said.

'Sorry.' She drew the door behind her, narrowing the gap.

'Corpo recycling. Everyone's getting one of these.' He held out the crate.

She stared.

'Notices were sent.'

'I didn't –'

Mail-shots, like all post these days, tended to slip through the flap and sink unnoticed beneath the paper waves.

His glance strayed over her shoulder to the stairs.

'Are you a collector or what?' he demanded, seeing the twin heaps ascending out of sight.

She glanced back and then again at the crate. With that lot gone she could do the front room, the hall, the stairs. There was no limit. Feeling faint, she stepped back.

'Oh holy God.' He regarded the hall. 'Sure, this'll take weeks to shift.' The crate trailed from one sturdy hand as he gawped. 'Is this the lot?'

She waved towards the front room and he first touched, then pushed and finally shoved the door open a foot.

'You need help,' he said, but she was eyeing the walls.

'Australia,' she murmured.

'Never been there,' he replied cautiously.

'The Null Arbor Plain.'

'I'd be more for Bondi Beach myself.'

'That too.'

He saw her grey eyes sparkle and the colour come into her cheeks.

'I won't tell anyone,' he promised.

So she told him. By the time she finished he was sitting on a plateau of *Times* colour supplements with his mouth open. She gestured at the magazines. 'So you see, if I could get rid of all of this.'

She felt for her cigarettes.

'Not in here,' he said. 'One spark and you're the Towering Inferno.'

'I never thought of Dante,' she said.

They moved to the kitchen where he accepted a cigarette.

' 'Tis a problem of quantity,' he said. 'I dunno where we'd put –' he focused on the yard and jerked his head '– the Outback?' Felix slumbered on a warm flagstone. Dandelions made miniature suns in the paving cracks.

'Lemme think about it.' He looked again at Mary. 'I'll be back,' he said at the doorstep. 'I'm Kevin,' he called from the gate.

That evening, while she tightened the wing mirror, he returned. She did not recognise him under the broad-brimmed hat with corks dangling in front of his face.

'G'day,' he said and handed her a bundle of sticks. She watched while he hauled in logs, a billycan and a guitar. Then he returned to the gate and led in a small chestnut mare. A runty mongrel followed them down the hall. Kevin jerked his head towards the dog: 'Dingo.'

In the backyard he constructed a pyre and then took a box of

matches from his pocket. They raced in and out with piles of magazines. Continents went roaring up in flames. The logs caught hold. The billycan steamed. Kevin sat propped up by the saddle. Mary lay against the horse's polished flank. Kevin played the guitar. Dingo eyed Felix who was welded to the lid of the bin. Mary showered spoons of coffee into the billycan. The fire warmed the walls around them and made deep indigo shadows. The air above wavered and stars trembled in the heat. Mary gazed up. This was the same sky that made a gleaming tent over Australia, Africa, India. A fragment of paper lifted from the flames, went up, turning over and over and became a spark, a red star, a mirage.

BRIEGE DUFFAUD

Over the Decades

Harriet rang the doorbell late that Sunday morning. Tess was chopping red peppers to put in the lentil goulash and she'd coaxed me into trailing the Hoover just one more time over the living-room carpet, to clean up the new crop of dog hairs. 'You don't *mind*, do you, Maureen?'

Well I did mind, to tell you the truth. They hoovered at hourly intervals in that house. True, Patrick's spaniels did keep shedding drifts of their long blond hair over carpets and sofas, but I still thought the pair of them had gone quietly crazy. Since poor old Tess lost her job in that advertising agency she'd been slowly turning into some bizarre cliché of the ideal fifties housewife.

'Well, we can't *all* just sit around reading books, Maur,' she'd said the previous evening, obsessively polishing the million bits of china that I remembered gathering dust in the old Wimbledon mansion they briefly lived in, while she and Patrick were out having themselves a constant ball. 'I mean, there's this place needs to be kept up for a start, and then all the animals, it's a full-time job looking after them, you wouldn't believe.'

I had a mad vision of endless herds of cows bawling at the gates to be milked, but there were only a couple of pampered cats dragging their bare bums disgustingly along the work top and the two spaniels going bald with boredom over the beige carpets.

'I mean, at the end of the day it's all down to me, isn't it,' Tess complained. 'Nobody else is going to muck in and do it, that's for sure. And I can't treat myself to help in the house, not these days, not on what he takes home cabbing.'

I noticed an odd little whine at the back of her voice. It was new, and disconcerting. This was Tess, for heaven's sake, this was my old mate Tess rabbiting on like that, whinging away in overworked poverty. You could feel sorry for her, you could want

to take up a collection, ask Camelot for a hand-out. Till you remembered that she had only a two-bedroomed semi to keep clean and that between them they were earning about three times my widow's pension, even now. It wasn't something I could say out loud because I wasn't sure she and Patrick hadn't noticed even worse changes in me and that they wouldn't be whispering shameful pitying *married* things about me once I was safely in my room.

She'd cheered up, though, at the thought of Harriet coming to Sunday lunch. It would be like the old days, she said, we'd have a great time the three of us catching up on everything. You could rely on old Harriet, she said, things had always seemed that much more hopeful, hadn't they, when she was around.

I'd been doubtful, recalling all I'd had to listen to recently, about the same lady . . .

And now here *was* Harriet, standing outside on the doorstep and I was suddenly shy about meeting her. Totally unable to answer the doorbell, to a woman I'd known since we were teenagers.

'Lucy, would *you* mind letting Harriet in?' Tess called from the kitchen and my daughter obediently pulled open the front door.

Harriet burst in noisily, surrounded by two bounding snorting labradors.

'Darling!' she shrieked. 'How lovely! It *is* Lucy, all grown up, Tess *told* me you were here with your mum! How lovely, how simply lovely! Come and be kissed, dear child!'

Lucy, overwhelmed, disappeared into an acreage of denim bosom and was released, bright pink and giggling with astonishment. We're more laid-back in our family.

I could see this was an act Harriet had been perfecting for years, this bursting loudly through friends' front doors, minded by huge dogs, braying at people. It was evidently her nineties act, her end-of-century act. Her eighties act had been quieter and classier, *bon chic bon genre*, accompanied by designer scarves or a whiff of 'Polo'. And in the seventies Harriet had been a different person entirely. Hadn't we all?

The labradors, meanwhile, had hurled themselves upon the little King Charles spaniels, not to eat them or mount them as one

might have crassly supposed but, in a triumph of nurture over nature, to hug them and lick them and roll them about with loud yelps of joyous acceptance.

I waited to be hugged in my turn but Harriet just said 'Hi!' and started down the passage towards the kitchen. 'Hello, Harriet,' I muttered, deeply hurt, and she turned with a bound: 'Maureen! Darling, I didn't recognise you! I took you for one of Tess's cronies. You look so different!'

And I too was quickly seized and crushed and put down again like a doll or a spaniel, as she swept royally towards the kitchen and Tess. Patrick raised his eyebrows and we made ironic little faces at each other.

I was glad to see her, though. I was glad to see her so *well*. The rumours we'd heard, Tess and me. The horror stories. You won't recognise her, we'd been told, she's not the Harriet we used to know. She's *huge*, they said, bloated, she's let herself completely go. There had been whispers of drink, of drugs, of depression. Of shamefully young toy-boys. Of a dustbin lid hurled through some married guy's front window. Of a night in the cells in some dreary Northern town.

I'd heard all the appalling details of the latest divorce. Several different sets of appalling details, in expensively scandalised calls from old acquaintances who wouldn't normally have dreamed of phoning me in France.

'A big pinch of salt,' Tess advised when I rang her to check. 'Harriet would hardly have treated that lot to all the intimate details, would she?' Or would she? It was such a long time, after all, since we'd actually seen her.

A mess, poor Harriet. That had been the general conclusion, whispered with pity or with glee, more often with genuine concern. She'd been good value after all, Harriet, in her day. A great person. A great mate.

So what had I been expecting? Some big flabby heap of a thing, dead-eyed, bleach-headed, fag-end scorching the hairs on her double chin. Finished.

And instead . . .

She was a good deal larger, yes, one could see that, but it was mostly muscle. Those labradors, after all, forever straining on

their leashes. In jeans and denim blouson, Doc Martens lying casually open, lengths of coloured twine instead of laces. The face a lot plumper, sure, but not a line, not a bag, not a jowl, the snobby ash-blond hair pulled back in a short pony-tail.

This woman is my age. Even allowing for the exaggerations, her life has been a mess. Three husbands, three children, three horrifically prolonged bouts of post-natal blues, three divorces, three vicious battles for custody. She's been in car crashes, she's been off motor bikes and push-bikes and horses, she's broken jaws and ribs and collar-bones. And last Sunday morning, bursting the seams of Tess's and Patrick's narrow little suburban hall, she was looking great. Whereas I . . .

'You're looking *much* better, Maureen! You were wearing spectacles, weren't you, last time we met? A mistake, darling, at our age!'

Now I'd always fancied myself in my big round glasses. I thought they gave me a sort of intellectual-waif quality. Apparently not. I'd put them down on the work top in the kitchen while I hoovered and there they were going to stay till Harriet left. Too bad if I kept forking up bits of table-cloth in mistake for my lunch.

Harriet by this time had swept into the living-room and pulled Lucy down beside her on the sofa. Patrick was busy with bottle and corkscrew, and Tess was standing about, looking anxious, just inside the door. I bundled the Hoover back under the stairs and grabbed the vacant place beside Harriet, looking forward, I suppose, to one of the long boozy chinwags of our youth. As if our lives hadn't irrevocably changed since then, and changed us with them.

I wondered if I ought to mention Paul's death and my grief and the upheaval that was taking place in my life and Lucy's. But she'd certainly heard; Tess would have written or phoned her at the time. It might be better if I wasn't the one to bring up the subject. English people are often embarrassed by the bereavement of others; they don't thank you for thrusting it upon them. Not Harriet, though, surely? Harriet would know how to express her sorrow, she'd never been exactly mealy-mouthed had she? And she'd *want* to express it, I knew that. She'd known Paul, after all, they got on like a house on fire that time she and her husband

came over to stay with us in France. Years ago, just before the second divorce: the cracks had already been showing, shoulders had been offered and gladly wept upon. I waited for the condolences and hoped I wouldn't make an eejit of myself weeping. A word of kindness could still set me off, even though it was over a year already . . .

Patrick poured us glasses of white wine.

'Oh I'm not drinking this morning, darlings,' Harriet said, draining her glass and holding it out for a refill. 'Well, maybe just one more and then I have to rush off, Timmy's waiting for me in the Duke's Head actually. We're lunching with these guys from Dubai, racehorse owners. *Crazy* pair, we only just met them last night. And as I'm bound to get pissed anyway I may as well wait and do it on their nice expensive wine. Not that this stuff isn't absolutely delicious, Patrick. Sainsbury's?'

Patrick guffawed, that's all you could call it. Good-natured big lump he's turned into in middle age. Something to do with his business going down the drain, probably. The old eighties arrogance is gone.

Tess looked hurt and helpless, then grabbed a smile from someplace. 'Oh that's all right, Harriet, we weren't really expecting . . .' She crept back into the kitchen. To stir the yoghurt into the goulash, I knew, but it looked like a defeat. Pathetic, really, that's all you could call it. When we were young she'd have cut Harriet into slices, no bother. Now she often looks as if she's been cut into slices herself, by age and redundancy and shopping lists and dog hairs and dishwashing.

Lucy was outraged: 'But you made Tess believe you were staying to lunch, Harriet. That's what she said when she came off the phone. She's got it all prepared, she must be devastated!'

'Lentil goulash? You're joking! I *never* eat meals with Tess, that's why I haven't seen her for four years. She's *always* devastated, poor thing, or whatever the current cliché happens to be. I believe she was *shattered* last time, when I refused to share a plate of Quorn with her. *Quorn*, darlings! The nerve of these people!'

'Don't laugh, Harriet,' I said. 'It's really very nice, Tess's goulash, you'd never know it wasn't –'

'Dear God, Maureen, don't tell me *you've* become a vegetarian too!'

'Euh . . . yes actually . . . Well just since this mad –'

She wasn't listening. Patrick winked at me and refilled our glasses.

'God, you lot really piss me off, all you towny types and your urban mythology. Those dear little animals I suppose you're thinking and their dear little sensibilities! Bet you've all got leather shoes on, though, haven't you? Bet you wouldn't be seen dead in elastomere. Or would you?' she added, peering slyly along her famous Greek nose at my new grey viscose shirt that Tess swore you'd easily take for silk. 'And I suppose you're against fox-hunting too, aren't you? You've joined the Antis, have you?'

'Well, it's not something I ever –'

'Of course you're against it! You all are nowadays. Tell me this, Maureen, did you ever have to look at a flock of lambs lying in a field with their throats torn out? That's your sweet little foxes for you!'

'Harriet, I honestly don't give a toss one way or the –'

'And I bet you're one of these who would like to buy up all the racehorses and keep them as tame little pets and sicken them with sugar lumps? You've never *been* on a horse probably, you or Tess, you can have no *idea*. You'd ban the Grand National, you'd ban the –'

'Jesus, Harriet, I only said I liked lentil goulash!'

She looked at me and laughed, seeming to come back from somewhere far.

'Of course you did, darling! You must think I'm crazy. Bet they all told you I'd gone off my head, didn't they? No, it's just that I always go a bit over the top when I have to be around vegetarians. Or the politically correct or any of that crap. You see, I've got so amazingly close to the reality of things since I've been living in the Cotswolds with Timmy. The sort of rural reality none of your swampy little *Guardian*-reading souls could even imagine, here in this smug suburb of yours!'

'Hey, Harriet, d'you mean Rural Reality as in Aga Saga?' Patrick asked with another of his big good-natured laughs. He was trying hard, you could see. I wondered if inside he was crying

his eyes out for his own brief country-house life-style, of which only the ageing spaniels and the bits of Wedgwood had survived as souvenirs.

Harriet dismissed the poor soft lump with a shrug. She always had. Back in the eighties she'd never once appeared to notice Tess's and Patrick's big Thatcherite success story or its abrupt ending. And when Lucy opened the door to her and she bounded into the hall, I don't think it had even registered with her that they were living in a different house now, in a different part of London.

'Actually, I've just remembered.' She giggled. 'You *must* think I'm crazy. Of *course* you can ride! It was *you* who used to ride those racehorses with me, wasn't it, Maureen?'

'That's right, Harriet,' I said tiredly. 'That was how we all met.'

Brigid from the Bogs, that's what Harriet used to call me when we were sowing our teenage oats working as lads in a seedy National Hunt stable in Sussex. She thought she was a right comedian. Well, so did I, I suppose, when I christened her The Slut from the Shires. Tess was working there for the holidays, a stroppy little art student from south London who bullied our trainer's mad wife into staying on her feet and functioning, and who made sure there was always food on the table and clean sheets on the beds. Four-letter contempt for one another's alien styles and backgrounds turned over the months into a bizarre friendship that saw us into our twenties and lasted even after life and marriage took us and flung us in three different directions. And now, time had done something to Harriet and she'd apparently forgotten it all.

Over the decades she'd remained the centre of our lives. We'd gossiped about her and speculated and worried about her. I'm sure Tess occasionally *prayed* for her. Every detail of her life was high drama to us. And there I was, sitting beside her on Tess's and Patrick's beige come-down of a mail-order sofa, and she was raving away about rural values and slaughtered lambs till I began to wonder if she even knew any longer who we *were*.

The impression vanished when she threw an arm of solid comfort round my shoulders: 'Tess told me, darling. She rang up

at the time and told me. I should have written, I know, but I was in no state to do anything just then. As you probably heard.'

So she did remember. She did care about me. Well of course she did. She was a mate, wasn't she? She was Harriet. I braced myself for the effusive condolences, the renewed hugs.

'So how are you hacking it all on your own, then?'

'Oh, oh well, I'm coping all right but –'

'Of course you are, darling! It's great, isn't it? Glorious freedom. One's own woman. Better than being a little French housewife, eh?'

'But *Harriet*!' I was outraged. 'Harriet, we didn't *live* on that level, Paul and I, I was *never* a little –'

'He used to keep you shut in the kitchen, didn't he? They all do over there, don't tell *me*. Remember all those times I came to see you, there you were dithering around all day from the chopping-board to the cooker. Just like poor Tess in there. *Tess*!' she yelled. 'Stop sulking, you fool! Come out here and kiss me goodbye. I'm going!'

Harriet only came to see me in France that one time, when Lucy was small. We took them out to all the local restaurants except for the day I insisted on making *boeuf en daube* for no other reason than to show off my French cooking skills. I always used to have this mad peasant need to show off, with Harriet. It took the best part of a morning to buy the ingredients and struggle through the preparations with her derisive eye upon me, and then the four of us sat in the kitchen getting morosely sloshed on red wine while the children whinged around us, as we waited endlessly for the thing to cook instead of going out visiting Fort La Latte as we'd planned. Harriet never gets things *completely* wrong, there's always a germ. (I mean, no way would I ever want to ban the Grand National but she must always have been aware of how scared I actually was of the big neurotic horses we exercised together in that stable.)

'Tess tells me you're intending to go back and live in Ireland. Letting your family reclaim you in your widowhood as it were. Is that *wise*, Maureen, do you think? Pack of old dipsos, weren't they, your family?'

'Pioneers actually, Harriet. Teetotallers.'

'Yes, of course. Same thing, darling, in the end. Extremists. Don't let them reclaim you, Maureen. Don't settle for that. You're worth more than playing old Mrs Gummidge at your brother's fireside. You stay here in England with Tess and me. Enjoy your freedom. Find yourself a fella. I'm up in London every other week nowadays. We'll see a lot of each other, we'll have ourselves a ball!'

I listened to her going on bossily, crazily, the ultimate survivor with her new, and yet absolutely familiar, braying voice, and I knew for certain that I wouldn't be going back to live in Ireland. It seemed like the depths of cowardice even to have thought about it. Life was still out there it seemed, in Harriet's bucking bolting world, life champing at the bit, scary and exciting, raring to be lived in any number of outrageous ways. Even now.

'Don't lose touch again, Harriet,' I said devoutly, hugging her. She hugged me back, and she hugged a reluctant Lucy and a jokily grimacing Patrick. Then she and Tess and all the dogs got into a noisy affectionate scrum by the front door.

'I'll ring you tomorrow, Tess,' Harriet was saying. 'We'll talk for hours and hours. I'll tell you all about my glossy lunch with the hunky Arabs. We'll tear them all to pieces. We get on *so* much better on the phone, don't we, darling? We always have, isn't it funny? It's real life that gets in our way. All that cooking and eating and cleaning you've always insisted on doing!'

Tess came back from the door all smiles and we helped her to serve the goulash and salad. I caught sight of myself in the kitchen mirror and hastily grabbed my glasses off the work top.

'I wonder how many years before we set eyes on *her* again?' Patrick said.

'She's a horrible woman!' my daughter burst out. 'Really horrible. She must have changed a lot. I see what they mean about letting herself go all right. I mean I can't imagine either of you ever being best mates with *that*.'

Tess turned on her: 'But she hasn't changed a bit, Lucy, she's still the same old Harriet. And we're still as close as ever, aren't we, Maur?'

'To be sure we are!' I said. 'None of us has really changed at all. The three of us are exactly the same people we've always

been. It's just that everything else keeps changing all round us, isn't it?'

We looked down at our plates and then we looked, aghast, at each other. Back over all the decades that had gone. I could see that Tess was wondering if it wasn't too late to rush out to Sainsbury's and buy us salvation. A roast, or a turkey, or some bloody great haunch of venison . . .

Lucy and Patrick looked bewildered, as well they might, and then we all smiled at one another and picked up our forks and started eating lentil goulash.

MARIE HANNIGAN

The Bloodstone

It was the night before all that trouble with the seals and we were sparking off each other like the raw edges of knives. My mother said it was the moon. A blood moon, its fat, livid face had risen tides so high they licked across the nose of the pier.

My brother was still manic from the accident in Saudi and I was wired too, waiting for the *Leviathan* to land, the end of my trip off. Kara was like a briar.

She'd been on the warpath since the fishermen had come to see my father. Anxious for guidance from their long-time spokesman, they complained about the poor season, depleted stocks, the infestation of seals on the Inish. My father acknowledged the need for action and quietly declined to take part.

After they had gone, Kara lit on him until her shrieks rent the house. 'You never even tried to stop them.'

When she ran out of steam, he said just four words: 'People have to live.'

You'd think she'd have seen the sense of this. Kara's nineteen years old with a child to support, but sometimes she acts like a kid herself. By evening, she'd got her friend Annie to put an appeal on the Internet, while she scribbled a petition to hawk around the pubs.

Friday night was landing night. The bars would be full of fishermen. To them, the only good seal was a dead seal.

'You'll get nothing but hassle,' I warned.

Manus jumped in. 'She can do what she likes.'

I waited for my father to wise them up. They'd never seen seals tracking a boat; never watched helpless while the little thieves came up with the nets to bite a live salmon in half. My father said nothing. That bugged me so much, I left the house.

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Three vodkas on I began to mellow out. Perched in the balcony of Johnny's nightclub, Val was on the prowl and hot to trot. It was almost a year since the last disastrous fling. Funny how time can blur the worst of memories.

The bar was filling up. My brother came in with a bearded figure. Jackie, the Prophet, back from Saudi. Last time I'd seen him was after the accident, when he'd brought Manus home. Jackie was the one who'd gone into a still-collapsing tunnel to pull my brother free. He was a hero in our house, though I'd liked him before that. From the first time Manus had brought his gaffer home, I'd hurled my wild desires against the rock of his stillness. He never seemed to notice.

I turned my attention to a group at the bar. Strangers who didn't act like strangers, which meant they were fishermen. To a tide-rider any port is home. My focus zoomed in on the tall one, taking in the body confidence, long lean legs. He turned and caught me watching, smiled and turned away. It was enough. One of us would make a move before the night was out.

I was distracted by a commotion near the entrance. The bouncer wagged a finger at someone who had just come in. Kara and her crazy petition. She moved towards the fishermen and I watched her trying to make her point. The tall one turned his broad back on her with some remark that brought an explosion of laughter from his friends. You could tell from the slump of Kara's shoulders that the insult was crude. She backed out through the entrance.

I picked up my drink and descended to the bar. The fisherman caught my waist as I was passing. His eyes were so deep you could strip off and dive into them. I pulled away. My sister might be an idiot, but blood was blood.

Manus was bending Jackie's ear when I squeezed in beside him, though he had to shout above the racket from the disco. The music changed and a couple of cowboy-booted lovelies got up to strut their stuff. They gestured for Jackie to join them. He stood and I felt a plunge of disappointment, then panic when he took my elbow. I could wriggle a hip with anyone but that country stuff defied me. By the time we left the floor I was

hot and discouraged. I'd never impress with my line-dancing skills.

Manus had gone to the bar. I pulled off my sweat-soaked shirt, saw Jackie taking in my skimpy top before he looked away. 'Don't do that to me, girl. It's not good for a man my age.'

'You're not that old.'

'Thirty-two. Must seem ancient to you.'

'Only seven years between us. It's hard to tell with all that camouflage.'

He fingered the fuzz. 'Yeah. Can't remember what I look like myself.'

He sneaked a glance and I held on, until Manus came back with the drinks, breaking the moment. Jackie stood to go. 'First night home. Jet lag. You know how it is.'

'What about your pint? And you haven't told me about the Malaysia job yet.'

'We'll meet for a yarn tomorrow night. The Seaview. Nine o'clock.' The invitation was for Manus. I watched him go over the rim of my glass, passing the group of fishermen on his way out. The tall one was chatting up an anorexic redhead.

We left the disco soon after. Manus put a hand on my shoulder to steady himself as we made our way home. He'd only taken a couple, not enough to leave him legless. That's how he'd been since the accident. Two pints and he was gone. He paused for a moment, to let the vertigo pass, and we stared up at the maze of seagulls tormenting the lights of a tank boat – the *Leviathan* was landing. Manus clocked my grim expression. 'Time to pull on your fishing boots.'

I shook my head. 'Cook never sees the deck. I'm stuck in the galley, shoving food in a microwave. It's not my idea of real fishing.'

'What's real fishing? Gutting fish on an ice-cold deck. Half-drowned every time you hit a lump of water. No money half the time.'

He'd spent two hard winters fishing before Jackie recruited him. He couldn't understand my problem.

'I like to feel the deck beneath my feet. The buzz when there's a big swell up and you head into a wall of sea. It's not the same on a tank boat.'

'Wait till the winter storms in the Faeroes. I've heard it gets middling rough up there.'

'I'm not going to the Faeroes. Thinking of jacking it in.'

'And you making a fortune? You must be mad.'

'No. Just dying of terminal boredom.'

'How come you haven't found yourself a good man yet?'

'Some of us are programmed to go for the wrong kind. Scientists have proved it.'

Manus spluttered in disbelief.

'No really. It's true. They're trying to isolate the rogue genes so they can warn susceptible women.'

I knew my own weakness for hard-living men and the last one had scared me. Weeks of non-stop horizontal tango, followed by months of jealousy and aggression. When he threatened violence, I'd lifted a stool and told him I'd lamp him if he took a step closer. I didn't tell Manus all this, but he sussed that something had knocked a dent in my cockiness.

'You should find yourself a nice, steady bloke like Jackie. Plenty of dosh. Treats every woman like china. That's the kind of buck you want.'

This might have been a general statement or my brother's way of giving his blessing. Either way it didn't matter. Jackie would never make a move. It went against some code of honour to shift the sister of a friend.

When we got home Kara sat crumpled on the doorstep, the petition abandoned at her feet. Manus sat down to console her for the scanty response. He flapped at me when I told him he was blocking the doorway. Across the street a door flew open and Annie came huffing towards us. She was waving a computer printout, a response to the appeal.

We studied the e-mail.

'*Gaiia*'s coming to monitor the situation. She'll be here Sunday night at the latest.'

'Who the hell is Gaiia?'

'It's not a who, Val. *Gaiia*'s a sailing ship. Belongs to Marine Action.' Annie beamed. 'They'll put a spotlight on the Inish. Nobody's going to be killing seals while they're about.' She was wheezing from her dash across the street. The Ventolin came

out. Sweat broke on her forehead as she sucked on the inhaler. She plonked herself down to recover. There were three of them blocking the doorway now. I rooted through my bag for the keys of the *Lev*, turned on my heel and made for the boat.

One advantage of being the only woman on a super-trawler, you don't have to share cabin space. I was burrowing under the duvet in my stateroom when it came to me. We'd be going to sea in a couple of days, a six-week trip. Jackie would be off on his travels by the time I got back. I lay awake, planning my strategy until the blood moon gave way to first light.

That night I strolled into the Seaview like it was any other night, though I'd pulled out all the stops. Plunge-neck dress, high-heeled sandals, fancy underwear. The works.

Jackie was at the bar, sipping iced water. I took the nearest stool. 'Thought I'd warn you. Manus is running late. He was still in the shower when I left.'

Jackie knew my brother's habits well, we'd have an hour to ourselves before Manus appeared. When I saw him smile I was glad I'd bought the half-dozen night-lights to set the scene in my cabin. This is it, I thought, tonight's the night.

Jackie bought drinks and we were settling down in a quiet nook when a familiar figure banged through the door. I'd never seen my brother so punctual. Or so agitated. He blundered across the room, skidding to a halt at our feet. 'You have to talk some sense into Kara. She's walking herself into a heap of trouble.'

Jackie drove us to the pier. We got there in time to see my sister slither down the ladder into my father's punt. The motor boat danced, skittish on the swollen tide.

'Where the hell does she think she's going?'

'There's a rake of boats heading for the Inish. Someone tipped off the guards about the cull. The lads are going ahead tonight, before things get too hot.'

'And Kara thinks she can stop them on her own?'

We listened to her attempts to start the engine. It clanked and died with a nerve-grating whine. She tried again. And again. Manus shook his head. 'She'll never get it going.'

I knew better. Kara was stubborn enough to persist though she hadn't a clue about setting a course. 'She'll be carried out to sea.'

Manus hunched his shoulders, folding his bulky frame like an accordion. 'It's only bluff. She'll not head out on her own.'

'You're the one who backed her up. The least you can do is stay by her.' I knew this was unfair. He was swaying on his feet. Just standing on the pier was enough to make him dizzy.

'I'm not going out in no boat,' he muttered. He turned and walked away.

'If you won't go – I will.'

Manus kept going, putting as much space between us as his legs would allow, without actually running.

Jackie's hand was on my elbow. 'I'll come with you.' I gave him a grateful nod and began to shimmy down the ladder. Kara watched, hostile, as we boarded.

'You're not going to stop me.' She squared herself by the outboard. Pushing her out of the way I gave the cord a few sharp tugs. Within moments the motor caught and turned, and we were heading out the harbour.

The Inish was barely visible, a black hump against the darkness with a cliff face that rose sheer out of the sea. Taking the punt round to a small beach on the seaward side, we saw that the island was speckled with moving circles of light. Here and there burning gorse gave added light to the night's work. Kara shuddered at the sounds that carried over the water. As we eased into the shallows she was up and over the side.

Two lads stood sentry on the shore. When they saw Kara running, they came striding across the strand towards her. Their stance, their outflung arms, said it all. This was men's work – not for the eyes of women. There was a scuffle and a scream as someone went down. I leapt over the side. Jackie, a little slower to react, outpaced me, splashing through the last few feet of water.

One of the lads was writhing on the ground. The other hung onto Kara until, just in time, he saw the knee aiming for his groin. He took a side-step, loosening his hold, and she was off.

He whirled on us. 'Did you see what she tried to do to me? Did you see what she did to him?' His friend was still clutching the front of his trousers. 'We should take her up for assault.'

'She never meant it,' I apologised. 'She's not herself at the moment.'

'She's loop-the-loop all right.'

Somewhat appeased, the lads backed down. It was almost over anyhow – time to retrieve the six-pack they'd hidden in the rocks. Jackie grabbed my arm and we went to find Kara.

Ahead we could make out figures moving in a line. Some held torches, while others executed the business. They worked silently, never looking back. Seeing only what was caught in the beam of their lights, they swung their weapons with measured competence, aiming for the back of the head, listening for the thunk of club against bone. Night draped a shroud on what they left in their wake. I tried to close my senses against the smell of fresh blood, the moans of injured seals. Jackie had gone still and I felt the need to explain these desperate measures. He cut me off, pointing in the direction of raised voices some distance off. My sister was at the centre of a gathering crowd, shouting abuse. Someone was trying to placate her. I recognised Tommy, a friend of my father. 'These things have to be done, dear.' His tone was calm, reasoning.

Kara thumped him squarely in the chest and he stumbled, caught off guard by the force of the blow. She continued to flail as I pulled her back, stifling the urge to slap her. 'For God's sake, Kara. Cop yourself on!'

Tommy shrugged. 'You wouldn't expect a young one to understand.' For some reason his tolerance incensed Kara even more. Her voice rose the scale to ultrasonic.

The men turned their backs, walking away. They were anxious to get out of this place, back to their boats, back to port. There was a muttered complaint about unwed mothers living off the state. The speaker turned back to direct a parting shot. 'If you had to toil twenty hours a day, you mightn't be so quick to throw shit at those that are out bustin' their balls trying to make a living.'

Shadows fell in around us as the torchlights retreated across the island. Jackie picked up a smouldering whin bush, blowing on it until it lit, and we began to make our way back to the beach. In the quiet we heard a whimper. Kara grabbed the bush and a gust

of air flamed through it, throwing light on a seal pup. It was alive. Barely.

She dropped to her knees, reaching out as if to pet the creature, then recoiled as it shuddered. The pup was beyond help. She looked up into our faces and we knew what needed to be done. Nobody moved.

The seal's cries went through me. 'It'll be dead soon anyway. Come on away to hell out of here.'

'We can't leave it like this.'

'Stubborn wee bitch. You can sit here all night if you want. I'm going back to the boat.'

I had walked a few yards when I heard a thump. The whimpers stopped abruptly. Turning, I saw Kara struggle to her feet, a rock in her hand. Her legs began to give way. We rushed to support her and I saw that her fingers were wrapped around the bloodied stone. I tried to loosen it from her grasp. 'You can throw it away now.' She pulled her hand away, shoving it into the pocket of her jacket. 'Shock,' Jackie whispered. 'Let it be for now.'

On the way ashore, she sat bundled in a corner of the boat, eyes fixed on the deck with a smouldering wordless anger.

We were back at the pier when Jackie broke silence to offer a lift home. Kara walked on without answering. In the car, her gloom settled over us, forbidding conversation until we reached the house. I thought of inviting him in, decided against it. 'Thanks for coming with us.'

I was half-way out of the car when he spoke. 'See you around.' The classic brush-off. I murmured an acknowledgement and sauntered up the path as if it didn't matter. So much for seduction. The soles of my shoes were sucking off the cement, sticky with blood.

When I came down for breakfast my mother was eyeing the object in the middle of the kitchen table. Set on a sheet of newspaper, it looked worse in daylight, covered with gore and matted fur. Kara spooned egg into Daniel's mouth. Her calm unnerved me.

'How could you feed the baby with that thing sitting there. It's disgusting.'

Kara ignored me.

'You've made your point. Now get rid of it.'

'What's your problem, Val? Thought you were all in favour of this cull.'

I braced myself and began to lift the edges of the newspaper.

'Don't you dare touch it.' She had leapt to her feet, staring me down with a murderous glare.

My mother stepped in. 'You're upset. This thing will only keep it in your head. Throw it away, love.'

'Do you think I'd forget? It's not for me. It's for the rest of you. So the next time you're mouthing off about killing defenceless animals, at least you'll know what you're talking about.'

I turned to the old boy. 'Tell her she's being an asshole.'

He laid down his newspaper and considered the stone. 'The truth is neither good nor bad – it is only the truth.' He shook his paper out, retreating behind it. Solomon had spoken. The stone would stay.

My mother, pleading hygiene, insisted on washing it. She scrubbed it under the tap until her fingers were raw, but she couldn't rinse the blood away – it had seeped into the rock.

The *Gaiia* arrived that evening. There was a crowd on the pier to watch her come in. I saw my father's covetous expression as we stood admiring the vessel, a three-mast sailing ship, perfectly restored.

'It was a three-master took my great-great-granda off to fish the New Foundland Banks. He did his share of sealing too, when the fishing failed out there.'

'Don't tell Kara.'

'They were hard times, Val. People did what they had to do.'

'These are hard times. Fish is scarce enough without bloody seals taking the bite out of the fishermen's mouths. Everyone knows they're breeding out of control.'

He pointed to lettering on the bow of the ship. '*Gaiia*. Did you ever hear tell of that theory? Nature takes action to protect her own. They reckon we'll end up like the dinosaurs if we don't mind our manners.'

'You don't really believe that bull?'

'How would I know? I'm just an ignorant fisherman.'

The crew of the ship stepped onto the pier, and a Stetson-hatted figure moved in to greet them. Annie was on the job. We watched her load the Marantz, prime the sound, aim the microphone and fire off a volley.

Eyebrows were raised when the skipper stepped forward. A woman, leathered by time and sea, she responded with the energy of someone half her age, outraged at having arrived too late. 'We'll compile a report,' she confirmed. 'But statistics have no emotional impact. Not without an eyewitness account.' Annie glanced across at us and I knew what she was thinking.

Kara took the visitors into the living-room and closed the door. They stayed a long time. My mother brought them tea, returning to the kitchen in a fizz.

'They're making a study of seal colonies. Eighteen months round the British Isles. They want to take Kara away with them.'

The old boy was sceptical. Kara's sentimental nature had propelled her into action – but she was no fighter. She wouldn't move too far from her comfort zone.

'Don't be so sure. She's that mad about this whole thing, I wouldn't put it past her.'

She waited anxiously until the visitors had left, almost leaping at Kara when she'd closed the door behind them. 'Well . . . are you going away with them? Are you taking Daniel?' Kara looked at her as if she'd grown a spare head.

My father grunted. 'They asked the wrong sister. Val would have jumped at the chance.'

'You forget I'm on the wrong side.'

'What of it. If I was your age, I'd adopt any philosophy for the chance to sail a ship like that.'

Kara lifted the stone and stared at it. 'They said it's going to happen again if I don't speak out. People have to be told. It's the only way to stop it.'

Annie set up the interview with Seaboard Radio, though she warned it might be tough. Donal, her boss, was confrontational. When they returned from the studio we could see the way it had gone. My mother prised the story out of Kara. 'He asked if I knew

how many tons of fish it took to support a colony. Started quoting figures. I don't know stuff like that. Every time I spoke he corrected me. I felt so stupid.'

The old boy was philosophical. 'You didn't know your facts, love. Let it be a lesson.'

When we listened to the interview on the news that night his temperate mood vanished. 'Self-righteous little pup. Did you hear him badgering her? She never got a chance to say her piece.'

He slapped the telephone book on the table, flicking through until he found a number. When he came off the phone he had the look of a warrior. 'Right, my girl. If you're going into battle, make sure your weapons are sharpened.' He had spoken to a woman in the Marine Department who was sending out some notes.

Kara cast a huffy look at him. 'What's the point? I've blown it now.'

'Ach, who listens to Seaboard, anyhow. We'll get onto the big boys. When they hear about this they'll be down here like a shot.'

As spokesman for the Fisherman's League, my father had friends in the media. A television crew arrived at the house. They spoke to Kara briefly, but declined an interview. The pictures were enough, they said.

Kara seemed relieved. It was a surprise to see her bent over the notes the Marine Biologist had sent. The more she studied them, the more frustrated she became. The academic terms confused her. My father suggested a course in the RTC. Sixty miles wasn't that far away. She could get a flat. My mother offered to mind the baby. Kara grew agitated. When she stood abruptly and left the room, the old boy blew his top. 'There's gratitude. You offer her a chance and she can't even bother her arse.'

It was a weekend for unexpected visitors. A stranger sat at the kitchen table. Suited, clean-shaven, his face was two-toned, deeply tanned from brow to cheek-bones – unnaturally pale beneath.

Manus wheeled back in mock horror. 'What'll we call you now? You don't look like the Prophet any more.'

Admiring the cut of Jackie's suit, I thought ruefully of the red silk camisole. I was dressed in my oldest jeans, my father's baggy

jumper and underwear that had gone sludge-grey in my mother's boil wash.

'Well,' he said, 'what's the verdict? Am I clean-cut enough to take you out to dinner?'

'You'll do.' If he had revealed the features of a deep-sea gurnet I'd have thought the same. I was seeing past the two-toned face, beyond skin, bone and gristle.

I slipped into Kara's room to reclaim my best dress. She was sitting on the bed, trying to read her notes, while Daniel pulled at her hair and face, slamming his little fist on the pages. Instead of shouting at him, or putting him down, she sat there – tears dripping onto the paper. I figured it out then, the way it had probably hit her earlier. The marine biology course was made for her, a chance to live away from home, break free of my mother's protective web. But she'd have to leave Daniel and she'd never do that.

Over dinner, Jackie unfolded his plans. 'I have the offer of a trip to Malaysia, a consultancy job. But I'm thinking of staying home. Maybe set up my own business.'

'When?'

'Whenever you say the word.'

If he expected an ecstatic response, he showed no surprise at my hesitation.

'Maybe I spoke too soon. A proposal on a first date is a bit premature. I like to be straight about things.' He took a sip from his mineral water. 'I won't pretend I've led a sheltered life. But a well-travelled man makes a good husband. And a good father.'

It was the last bit that did it, that word that suggested my part in all this. He'd been everywhere. Done everything. What had I done? Nothing. No way was I ready for maternity.

'Actually, I have plans of my own.' It came out in a blurt that surprised me as much as Jackie. I hadn't even known I was considering it till then. 'The *Gaiia* needs a crewman – and I'm an experienced hand.' I would tell the ship's captain I was Kara's sister. With luck they wouldn't ask my opinion of seals.

Kara was still at the books when I got home. Daniel lolled in the

crook of her arm, his head almost touching the stone, now set on the bedside table.

'Kara. It's nearly four in the morning.'

'What? Can't be.' She squeezed her eyes shut. 'It's useless. I can't hack this techno jargon.'

'They might have part-time courses.'

She nodded. 'I'll do it, if it takes ten years. I want to be able to talk the way you do. Like you know you're right.'

'Maybe I *am* right.'

'No. I don't want Daniel growing up in a world where life means nothing.'

'They're only seals, Ka. Dumb animals.'

'It'd be the same if it was children.'

'Now you're being silly.'

'They're gunning down street kids in Brazil because their presence offends the tourists.'

'Kara, you know that's not the same.'

She said nothing for a moment, then took my hand and guided it to the stone, curling my fingers until they pressed into its killing edge. I knew then, blood moon or no blood moon, we would never agree, but I recognised that steely core, the awkward streak that would lead you down any twisting path – bar the easy road.

Kara's nose was buried in the book again. I lifted the baby from her arms, very gently, so as not to disturb either of them, and laid him to rest in his cot.

JAMIE O'NEILL

Nights of Rhodes

It's a tired old lover is the ferry to Rhodes. It curves inside the harbour's mouth, trickles its load of army trucks, tourists, turns on its side, snores home through the night; tomorrow returning, pumping its passion like an old closet to the gents at midnight.

It was late autumn when he arrived. He flumped down on the pier, exhausted, as if he'd paddled his own way from Piraeus. Sleeping bag, towel, dirty change of underwear; he sat there inspecting the jeeps and the single smart coupé that trailed off the boat. But there was nothing of interest, or at least no one took any interest in him, so he picked up his all and strode to the blue unknown: Rhodes town. He had ten hundred drax to his name, which is to say, the creature was stranded.

Of course it was bad those first weeks in Rhodes. There's no work there, no industry, nothing at all once the tourists have gone. And already the aeroplanes had gathered in their silvery flocks, migrated back north for the winter. The evenings grew shorter, colder stars pierced the night, it was the ghost of the year. Rhodes heaved a sigh of relief, drew the shutters and its chair to the fire.

He slept on the beach the first few nights, snatching a coffee where he could, living off cheap biscuits and cigarettes. The cafés looked like furniture stores, their summer tables piled inside. You can picture him sidling along till he finds one open. Maybe in Mandraki, the new town, where the markets are. He sits behind a squabbling family, sips his judicious cup. Soon as the Greeks have waddled away, he grabs their seats, devours their leftovers. In their corner by the till the waiters jeer till a nod from the owner sends one of them over. Outside the market he sat and begged, outholding his precatory hand. But it's a miserable place is

Rhodes, take any resort out of season. A finger and thumb scraped skinless together.

By night he wandered the old town that cosied inside the castle walls. The signs remained saying bistro or night-club, but their darkened steps might delve to dungeons. Mannequins in boutiques gleamed like armour under the moon. Daylight made a filmset of the place. The film was over budget. Now they must wait till spring to resume. Except in the Turkish quarter, down Socrates Street, where the cafés filtered on for waiters who didn't ski in Switzerland, didn't visit in turns their Scandinavian girlfriends. Clickety-click went their backgammon pieces. Clickety-clack went their coins.

Down these alleys and cobbled streets he walked, begging a cigarette then a light, with four three two hundred drax in his pocket. A poor disciple he must have presented. Sand in his hair, in his clothes; a snowy dust of salt on his skin that fell like dandruff when he scratched. No doubt he stank, unwashed body and dirty clothes, and his sleeping bag trailing behind him. Every evening he went down the harbour and watched the ferry depart. I think he hated Rhodes.

He wanted to go home. He wanted to go back home to Dublin. Saturday nights he'd play guitar in his bedroom. He'd wash his father's car on Sunday. Take a course in computers. Please people.

But he hadn't the fare. And there was no way you could jump that ferry, he could tell that just watching. The ferrymen saw him coming, even smiled hello to some of them. But they had eyes like dogs, guarding their vacant salons, hoarded treasure of an empty hold, their winter due.

By now the police had hunted him off the beach. He'd found this tiny park just off Mandraki, near the Amboise Gate to the old town, where the lamps were smashed and the thick growth of bushes gave cover. And he'd lie there in the dead of night, not listening but hearing the footsteps and muttering, coming and going till the blue hours of morning.

Who knows if he wondered, if he allowed himself to wonder, about those slow slow footsteps, that low low muttering, the shuffling so quiet, the rustling? And the gasp of breath quickening and the long sigh following and footfalls retreating in the dark.

And one morning when he'd spent the last of his drax on a final pack of Karelia and the veteran in the park gate kiosk had winked his usual knowing wink; and his stomach was sick to retching of cigarettes and biscuits and thick sweet coffee, sick to death of his own smell: this morning he gave in. That is to say he surrendered his fear. First open hotel he came to, he walked straight in. 'Got a room?' He tried to sound American, to lounge against the counter like a wire from pop awaited his pleasure at American Express.

He must have convinced them, or he was wrong about charity, because the man at the desk gave him a key no questions asked. He locked his door and fell on the bed.

He took a shower, washed out his clothes, showered again, whistled out the veranda. He came down for dinner. Of course he'd chosen the wrong hotel. No dining-room, just breakfast. 'What's breakfast?' Biscuits, coffee. Hungry still but all spruced up, he hit the town.

What did he expect? Did he really think he could wait in those derelict cafés, the telly blaring in a corner, and have all the Greeks queuing to feast him? All those old men, unshaven and grey, a word every half-hour, forever shuffling the cards for poker, and the women in a back room knitting in the dark and their cic-cic-cicada whispers, and where the young men crowded the jumping crickety backgammon moons. Did he really think he'd be the darling of Rhodes?

The creature, he was dying for a smoke, only dying. Maybe he said to himself, What the ~~fuck~~ am I going to do? Maybe in the Hospitallers' church he blurted a prayer to St Christopher. Maybe he composed a letter starting Dear Mammy and Daddy and had reached paragraph three before he screwed it up, choked it down a drain.

He left the old town, strayed by the sea to Mandraki. But he couldn't face the market again, nor his hotel room. He just walked. And even when he realised he was walking to the park, through the gates, through the bushes, up to the feculent pisser above, he didn't stop himself, didn't laugh and say, Don't be so bloody stupid.

Very well, it was dark in the park, no moon and the lamps all smashed, he had to pick his way like a blind man, feeling for the

path and the sudden steps and his sneakers on the gravel crushing the night. And when he caught the luminous whiteness in front, when the whiteness ponderously wheeled, he wanted to run. He thought it was a ghost. Christ, it's a ghost. But the man, only a man, with a white shirt and white cardigan cloaked over his shoulders, he approached with those slow steps and muttering lowly said only, 'Hello.'

'Hello.'

'English?' asked the man.

'Irish.'

A moment, then: 'I like the Irish. They are pretty, yes?'

Suddenly the man darted his hand, grabbed his chin, peered from dark dots in his halo face. His breath smelt of dinner, food and wine. 'You stay at hotel.'

'No,' he answered; but he knew the man then. Charitable Greek who'd given him a key no questions asked.

The man laughed, a single ejaculated breath. 'How old you are?'

He shrugged his shoulders and the gentling hand released him.

'You are pretty, yes?'

'I want cigarettes.'

'You want cigarette?'

'Marlboro. Not Greek shit.'

'Okay. Marlboro. Come.' He walked a little. 'You come. Now.'

And he followed, the creature, like a new-born lamb.

At the park gates the man hesitated, searched the street. 'You stay at hotel,' he repeated.

Again he said no and again the man laughed.

'Here is for you,' he said, handing a note. 'You buy Marlboro. I wait. You go now. Buy Marlboro. After I wait for you.' The man spread his hands, disseminating indifference. 'Here or in hotel I find you. Yes?'

He went, flying down the hill, clutching the hundred drax like a love note to his heart. In the market he ordered Nescafé with milk and a plate of chips which he wolfed down. He bought twenty Marlboro and smoked himself to death. He was too excited to plan anything. Too excited to think. But he knew he would survive.

When the café closed he skirted Mandraki back to the park.

That park where he had learned the phases of the moon. The hotel awaited him but he wanted to see. From across the street he peered through the gates. He could make out nothing. The path led in from the streetlights, falling darker and narrower, crowded in by the pressure of shrubs, trees overlapping overhead, like a tunnel, pressing down like a tunnel, almost, very almost, a fissure in the night.

COLUM McCANN

Everything in This Country Must

It was a summer flood when our draught-horse was caught in the river and the river smashed against stones. The sound of it to me was like the turning of locks. It was silage time and the water smelled of grass. The draught-horse, Father's favourite, had stepped in the river for a sniff maybe and she was caught, couldn't move, her foreleg trapped between rocks. Father found her and called *Katie!* above the wailing of the rain. I was in the barn waiting for drips on my tongue from the ceiling hole. I ran out past the farmhouse into the field. At the river the horse stared wild through the rain – maybe she remembered me. Father moved slow and scared like someone travelling deep in snow except there was no snow, just flood, and Father was frightened of water, always frightened. Father told me, *Out on the rock there girl.* He gave me the length of rope with the harness clip and I knew what to do. I am taller than Father since my last birthday, fifteen. I stretched wide like love and put one foot on the rock in the river middle and one hand on the tree branch above it and swung out over the river flood.

Behind me Father said, *Careful now hai.* The water ran warm and fast like girl blood and I held the tree branch, still able to lean down from the rock and put the rope to the halter of the lovely draught-horse.

The trees went down to the river in a whispering and they hung their long shadows over the water and the horse jerked quick and sudden and I felt there would be a dying, but I pulled the rope up to keep her neck above water, only just.

Father was shouting, *Hold the rope girl!* and I could see his teeth clenched and his eyes wide and all the travelling of veins in his neck, the same as when he walks the ditches of our farm, many cows, hedgerows, fences. Father is always full of ditches and fright

for the losing of Mammy and Fiachra and now his horse, his favourite, a big Belgian mare that cut fields once in the peaceful dark of soil long ago.

The river split at the rock and jumped fast into sprays coming up above my feet into my dress. But I held tight always to the rope, held it like Father sometimes holds his last Sweet Afton at mealtime before prayers. Father was shouting, *Keep it there girl good*! He was looking at the water as if Mammy was there, as if Fiachra was there, and he gulped air and he went down in the water and he was gone so long he made me wail to the sky for being alone. He kept a strong hold of one tree root but all the rest of his body went away under the quick brown water.

The night had started stars. They were up through the branches. The river was spraying in them.

Father came up splutter spluttering for air, with his eyes all horsewild and his cap lost down the river. The rope was jumping in my hands and burning like oven rings, and he was shouting, *Hold it girl hold it hai for the love of God hold it please*!

Father went down in the water again but came up early, no longer enough in his lungs to keep down. He stayed in the river holding the root and the water was hitting his shoulders and he was sad watching the draught-horse die like everything does and still I pulled on the halter rope so it would not, because Molly in the sweet-shop told me it is not always so.

One more try, Father said in a sad voice like his voice over Mammy and Fiachra's coffins long ago.

Father dipped under and he stayed down as long as yesterday's yesterday, and then some headlights came sweeping up the town road. The lights made a painting of the rain way up high and they put shadows on the hedgerows and ditches. Father's head popped out of the water and he was breathing heavy, so he didn't see the lights. His chest was wide and jumping. He looked at the draught-horse and then at me. I pointed up the road and he turned in the flood and stared. Father smiled, maybe thinking it was Mack Devlin with his milk truck or Molly coming home from the sweet-shop or someone come to help save his favourite horse. He dragged on the tree root and out-struggled from the river and

stood on the bank, and his arms went up in air like he was waving, shouting, *Over here over here hai*!

Father's shirt was wet under his overalls and it was very white when the headlights hit it. The lights got close close closer and in the brightening we heard shouts and then the voices came clear. They sounded like they had swallowed things I never swallowed. I looked at Father and he looked at me all of a sudden with the strangest of faces, like he was lost, like he was punched, like he was the river cap floating, like he was a big alone tree desperate for forest. They shouted out, *Hey mate what's goin' on?* in their strange strange way and Father said, *Nothing*, and his head dropped way low to his chest and he looked across the river at me and I think what he was telling me was, *Drop the rope girl*, but I didn't. I kept it tight, holding the draught-horse's neck above the water, and all the time Father was saying but not saying, *Drop it please Katie drop it, let her drown.*

They came right quick through the hedge with no regard for the uniforms that hide them. One took off his helmet while he was running and his hair was the colour of winter ice. One had a moustache that looked like long grasses and one had a scar on his cheek like the bottom end of Father's barn hayknife.

Hayknife was first to the edge of the river and his rifle banged against his hip when he jumped out to the rock where I was halter holding. *Okay luv you're all right now*, he said to me and his hand was rain wet at my back and he took the halter and shouted things to the other soldiers, what to do, where to stand. He kept a hold of the halter and passed me back to LongGrasses who caught my hand and brought me safely to the river bank. There were six of them now, all guns and helmets. Father didn't move. His eyes were steady looking at the river, maybe seeing Mammy and Fiachra in each eye of the draught-horse, staring back.

One soldier was talking to him all loud and fast, but Father was like a Derry window-shop dummy and the soldier threw up his arms and turned away through the rain and spat a big spit into the wind.

Hayknife was all balance on the rock with the halter, and he didn't even hold the branch above his head. Icehair was taking off

his boots and gun and shirt and he looked not like boys from town who come to the barn for love, he looked not like Father when Father cuts hay without his shirt, no, he looked not like anybody, he was very skinny and strong with ribs like sometimes a horse has after a long day in the field. He didn't dive like I think now I would have liked him to, he just stepped into the water very slow and not show-offy and began making his way across, arms high in the air getting lower. But the river got too deep and Hayknife was shouting from the rock saying, *Stay high Stevie, stay high side mate.*

And Stevie gave a thumbs-up to Hayknife and then he was down under the water and the last thing was the kick of the feet.

LongGrasses was standing beside me and he put Stevie's jacket on my shoulders to warm me, but then Father came over and he pushed LongGrasses away. Father pushed hard. He was smaller than LongGrasses but LongGrasses bashed into the trunk of the tree and hit against it. LongGrasses took a big breath and stared hard at him. Father said, *Leave her alone can't you see she's just a child?* I covered my face for shame like in school when they put me in class at a special desk bigger than the rest, not the wooden ones with lifting lids, except I don't go to school any more since Mammy and Fiachra died. I felt shame like the shame of that day and I covered my face and peeped instead through my fingers.

Father was giving a bad look to LongGrasses. LongGrasses stared at Father for a long time too and then shook his head and walked away to the river bank where Stevie was still down in the water.

Father's hands were on my shoulders keeping me warm and he said, *It'll be all right now love,* but I was only thinking about Stevie and how long he was under water. Hayknife was shouting at the top of his voice and staring down into the water and I looked up and saw the big army truck coming through the hedgerow fence and the hedge was broken open with a big hole and Father screamed *No!* The extra lights of the truck were on and they were lighting up all the river. Father screamed again *No!* but stopped when one of the soldiers stared at him, *Your horse or your bloody hedge mate.*

Father sat down on the river bank and said, *Sit down Katie*, and I could hear in Father's voice more sadness than when he was over Mammy's and Fiachra's coffins, more sadness than the day after they were hit by the army truck down near the Glen, more sadness than the day when the judge said, *Nobody is guilty it's just a tragedy*, more sadness than even that day and all the other days that follow.

Bastards, said Father in a whisper, *bastards*, and he put his arm around me and sat watching until Stevie came up from the water swimming against the current to stay in one place. He shouted up at Hayknife, *Her leg's trapped*, and then, *I'm gonna try and get the hoof out*. Stevie took four big gulps of air and Hayknife was pulling on the halter rope and the draught-horse was screaming like I never heard a horse before or after. Father was quiet and I wanted to be back in the barn alone waiting drips on my tongue. I was wearing Stevie's jacket but I was shivering and wet and cold and scared because Stevie and the draught-horse were going to die since everything in this country must.

Father likes his tea without bags like Mammy used to make and so there is a special way for me to make it – put cold cold water in the kettle and only cold then boil it then put a small boiling water in the teapot and swish it around until the bottom of the teapot is warm. Then put in tea-leaves not bags and then the boiling water and stir it all very slowly and put on the tea-cosy and let it stew on the stove for five minutes making sure the flame is not too high so the tea-cosy doesn't catch flame and burn. Then pour milk into the cups and then the tea followed at last by the sugar all spooned around into a careful mix.

My tea fuss made the soldiers smile, even Stevie who had a head full of blood pouring down from where the draught-horse kicked him above his eye. Father's face went white when Stevie smiled but Stevie was very polite since he took from me a towel because he said he didn't want to get blood on the chair. He smiled at me two times when I put my head around the kitchen door and he held up one finger meaning *One sugar please* and a big O from fingers for *No milk please*. Some blood was drying in his hair and his eyes were bright like the sky should be, and I could feel my

belly sink way down until it was there like love in the barn, and he smiled at me number three.

Everyone felt good for saving a life even a horse life, maybe even Father, but Father was silent in the corner. He was angry at me for asking the soldiers to tea and his chin was long to his chest and there was a puddle at his feet. Everybody was towel drying except Father because there was not enough towels.

LongGrasses sat in the armchair and said, *Good thing ya had heat lamps guv'nor.*

Father just nodded.

How was it under the water Stevie? said LongGrasses.

Wet, said Stevie and everybody laughed but not Father. He stared at Stevie then looked away.

The living-room is always dark with Father grim, but it was brighter now. I liked the green of the uniforms and even the red of Stevie's blood. But Stevie's head from the horse kick must have been very sore. The other soldiers were talking about how maybe the army truck should take Stevie straight off to hospital and not get dry, just get stitches, and not get tea, just come back later to see about the draught-horse if she survives under the heat lamps. But Stevie said, *I'm okay guys, it's just a scrape, I'd kill for a cuppa.*

The tea was good tasting from long brewing and we had biscuits for special visitors, I fetched them from the pantry. I tasted one to make sure they were fresh tasting and I carried out the tray.

I was sneezing but I was very careful to sneeze away from the tray so as to have politeness like Stevie. Stevie said, *God bless you* in his funny funny way and we were all quiet as we sipped on the tea but I sneezed again three four five times and Hayknife said, *You should change out of them wet clothes luv.*

Father put down his teacup very heavy on the saucer and it was very quiet.

Everyone even the soldiers looked at the floor and the mantelpiece clock was ticking and Mammy's picture was staring down from the wall and Fiachra when he was playing football and the soldiers didn't see them but Father did. The long silence was longer and longer until Father called me over, *Come here Katie,* and he stood me by the window and he took the long curtain in

his hands. He turned me around and wrapped the curtain around me and he took my hair and started rubbing not tender but hard. Father is good, he was just wanting to dry my hair because I was shivering even in Stevie's jacket. From under the curtain I could see the soldiers and I could see most of all Stevie. He sipped from his tea and smiled at me and Father coughed real loud and the clock ticked some more until Hayknife said, *Here, guv, why don't you use my towel for her?*

Father said, *No thanks.*

Hayknife said, *Go on guv*, and he put the towel in a ball and made to about throw it.

Father said, *No!*

Stevie said, *Take it easy.*

Take it easy? said Hayknife.

Maybe you should all leave, said Father.

Hayknife changed his face and threw the towel on the ground at Father's feet and Hayknife's cheeks were out-puffing and he was breathing hard and he was saying, *Fat lot of fucken thanks we get from your sort Mister.*

Hayknife was up on his feet now and pointing at Father and the light shone off his boots well polished and his face was twitching so the scar looked like it was cutting his face. LongGrasses and Stevie stood up from the chairs and they were holding Hayknife back, but Hayknife was saying, *Risk our fucken lives and save your fucken horse and that's all the thanks we get, eh?*

Father held me very tight with the curtain wrapped around me and he seemed scared and small and trembly. Hayknife was shouting lots and his face was red and scrunched. Stevie kept him back. Stevie's face was long and sad and I knew he knew because he kept looking at Mammy and Fiachra on the mantelpiece beside the ticking clock. Stevie dragged Hayknife out from the living-room and at the kitchen door he let go. Hayknife turned over Stevie's shoulder one last time and looked at Father with his face all twisted but Stevie grabbed him again and said, *Forget it mate.*

Stevie took Hayknife out through the kitchen and into the yard towards the army truck and still the rain was coming down outside and then the living-room was quiet except for the clock.

I heard the engine of the army truck start.

Father stood away from me and put his head on the mantelpiece near the photos. I stayed at the window still in Stevie's jacket which Stevie forgot and he hasn't come back for yet.

I watched the truck as it went down the laneway and the red lights on the green gate as it stopped and then turned into the road past where the draught-horse was lifted from the river. I didn't hear anything then just Father starting low noises in his throat and I didn't turn from the window because I knew he would be angry for me to see him. Father was sniff sniffing – maybe he forgot I was there. It was going right down into him and it came in big gulps like I never heard before. I stayed still but Father was trembling big and fast. He took out a handkerchief and moved away from the mantelpiece. I didn't watch him because I knew he would be shamed for his crying.

The army truck was near out of sight, red lights on the hedgerows.

I heard the living-room door shut then the kitchen door then the pantry door where Father keeps his hunting rifle then the front door and I heard the sound of the clicker on the rifle and him still crying going further and further away until the crying was gone and he must have been in the courtyard standing in the rain.

The clock on the mantelpiece sounded very loud so did the rain so did my breathing and I looked out the window.

It was all near empty on the outside road and the soldiers were going around the corner away when I heard the sounds, it wasn't like bullets, it was more like pops – one two three – and the echo of them came loud to me.

The clock still ticked.

It ticked and ticked and ticked.

The curtain was wet around me but I pulled it tight. I was scared, I couldn't move. I waited it seemed like for ever.

When Father came in from outside I knew what it was. His face was like it was cut from a stone and he was not crying any more and he didn't even look at me just went to sit in the chair. He picked up his teacup and it rattled in his fingers so he put it down again and he put his face in his hands and stayed like that. The ticking was gone from my mind and all was quiet everywhere in

the world and I held the curtain like I held the sound of the bullets going into the draught-horse's head, his favourite, in the barn, one two three, and I stood at the window in Stevie's jacket and looked and waited and still the rain kept coming down outside – one two three one two three one two three – and I was thinking oh what a small sky for so much rain.

EITHNE LE GOFF

Childlights

The fields which led down to the river were covered in frost, the sky was a clear hard blue and the cattle breathed steam into the cold air as they huddled in little groups around the empty troughs, like bored oxen in a nativity scene. The car stalled as we crossed the bridge and started up the hill towards the church, perhaps because of the cold or perhaps because of the way Annie was driving it. She was in a temper, and driving far too fast for the icy roads.

'Beloved Father Ray says today is the Feast of the Epiphany – the three kings bringing gifts to the baby, following the star. Your astrology have anything to say about that?'

It didn't work. Normally, Annie would be happy to launch into a discussion on the astrological significance of the Magi, but this morning she ignored my question. She slammed into first gear as the church appeared before us, as grey and as uncompromising as ever. Then she looked towards me and said abruptly: 'Do you really think they are all going to come?'

I sighed, wondering what could have possessed me to make me come back to Ireland for Christmas. I had discovered long ago that families were like Santa Claus: as you grew up it became too hard to believe in them, no matter how much you tried. I had sent a card to Stephen, safe in our LA apartment: 'I'm overfed with overdone food. I'm over-familied. I wish it was over and I was over there with you.' A small lie, that last phrase. I was beginning to feel that something else was over too, and this trip home had been a way of getting a more and more unsatisfactory relationship into perspective.

Now yet another family gathering was looming. Seemed like we couldn't get enough of one another. I said to Annie: 'I reckon most of them will appear. I heard Father Ray rounding them up

on the phone last night. He reminded me of a Wicklow collie – he even looks like one in his black and white – gathering in the recalcitrant members of his little flock.'

Annie groaned. 'Oh Christ. And I bet they don't want to see us any more than we want to see them. It's just that no one has the guts to say no to that old creep.'

'Just like old times.'

'Yes, except worse. He gets fatter and redder every time I see him; I swear he's going to explode one day. And there are more kids every time this family meets up. I don't think any of them realise that the world is over-populated as it is. The noise level will be incredible.'

'Maybe it won't be too bad.' I said this with more conviction than I felt. 'Maybe we are all old enough now to cope with being together. It will be the last time we meet in the old house, I suppose. Da says he is planning to move in the spring.'

'He changes his mind every few days. I don't know how Helen will cope if he moves in with them. The house they built is huge, though. But him and Shane never got on – imagine the fights he'll have with his son and heir!'

'It doesn't bear thinking of. It will be strange not to come back here any more, though; I can even feel a bit sorry for Father Ray. He keeps going on about how it's his last link with Mammy.'

'My heart bleeds for the old bugger. Isn't it funny, Kate – with all your Americanisms you still call her Mammy?'

'What should I call her? Our Mother Who Art in Heaven?'

I must have sounded defensive, because Annie said placatingly, 'Don't worry about it, it just sounds funny with your American accent. It would sound stranger if you were calling her Mom, or whatever. Your American friends must find it peculiar to come from such a big family.'

'The ones who know about it find it pretty hilarious, I suppose.'

I didn't tell Annie that none of my American friends knew the size of my family; I had too much to put up with from them on the subject of my Irishness without that – every time I lost my temper or made a joke – 'Oh Kate, you're so *Irish*.'

As we got out of the car, it struck me how little the people in the States knew about my life. Stephen was the only one I had talked

to about my past, and only at the beginning, in the days when he thought me a one-woman comedy show. Everything I did he had found hilarious: I had regaled him with stories of the farm, of our wild and wonderful childhood, of the neighbours with names like Bill the Rummager and Mary the Pole. Now things weren't being such fun any more. I wondered if he would still be in the apartment when I got back. Somewhere, at the back of my mind before I left, had been the idea that perhaps I might not go back to America; that this might be the time to make the move home. Within six hours of landing I knew what a foolish idea that had been. The Celtic Tiger was still at heart the old sow that eats her farrow. I had been gone too long.

I glanced at Annie over the top of the car. No use looking for advice from her; she would tell me to check my Pluto transits or mutter something from the I Ching about thin pigs raging on the mountainside. I often thought that Annie was the one who should have ended up on the west coast of America – she was much more New Age than I, who lived there. But then she was also more ascetic than Father Ray, the professional renouncer. Our Annie was born an extremist. We stood for a moment, grinning at each other.

'How are we going to get through this?'

'Grit your teeth and think of the stars,' I said.

Children of various shapes, sizes and decibel levels were streaming out from cars all over the parking lot. I forced myself to smile at them and hoped that none of them thought I was responsible for this gathering of the clan. Father Ray was in the church porch, welcoming everyone in. I hadn't been in one since the day of my mother's funeral (I had been reduced to lying on Christmas Day – claiming to have walked over the field to the church for a mass no one else had gone to – just like old times) and the memory of that day's misery hit me as I entered. Nothing had changed; the feeling of claustrophobia, the heavy silence broken only by sonorous words, the odd embarrassed cough or child's whimper, quickly silenced. An eternity of boredom while God in the shape of a baldy old git in a white dress stood on the altar and told us what to do. Sheila Farrell had extended her repertoire on the organ to include some folk hymns, but the

instrument still sounded as asthmatic as ever. I remembered my mother's description of her playing: 'A goat pissing on a bodhran.' My hands covering my face to hide my laughter, I felt ten years old again. Annie dug me in the ribs and whispered, 'The Mass is endless, go forth in peace.'

An ancient, juvenile joke; but we were both snickering helplessly as we left the church.

The huge carnivorous meal waiting at the farm made me think longingly of the diet of fresh fruit and vegetables I would embark on as soon as I got back to the States. I would have to go on the dry too, I thought to myself as I poured another glass of wine. One of my sisters-in-law was attempting to engage me in conversation.

'So are you still enjoying the States?' I sighed. Questions on my life invariably took one of two forms: either people asked 'Are you still enjoying the States?' as if the only reason I had lived there for the past ten years was to have a good time: or 'Are you settled there yet?' – the obvious inference being that no one could really settle anywhere but Ireland.

'Yeah, I guess I'm happy in California.'

'No sign of wedding bells yet? Patrick, mind that glass.'

'No.' I drank some wine.

'Sure I suppose you have time enough – though if you are thinking of children you wouldn't want to leave it too late. I suppose marriage is different over there too, with all that divorce – and the Aids, the Aids must be terrible.'

She interrupted herself again to slap Patrick, a permanently red-faced creature who reminded me strangely of Uncle Ray. He began to howl at the top of his voice.

'Well, I told you to stop it. Get down out of that or I'll get your father at you . . . yes, the Aids must be terrible.'

'Seems like the problem is pretty bad here too. And there is divorce here now too, isn't there?' I had to shout to make myself heard over Patrick. I was holding my temper in check with difficulty.

'Oh, only in Dublin, with those junkies and that. Patrick, stop bawling or you'll get another one.'

I considered asking her why they only had divorce in Dublin, then remembered Phyllis's ability to edit any conversation so that she only heard what she wanted to hear.

In an attempt to change the subject, I asked about Patrick's progress at school.

'Patrick's problem is that he has this dreadful teacher who has no idea what a sensitive child he is. I think he has a problem with alcohol, in fact,' Phyllis whispered.

'Patrick has?' Nothing about that child would surprise me.

'No, no, of course not. His teacher. His wife is after leaving him.' I reckoned I'd have a problem with alcohol myself if I had a class full of Patricks to control. The child seemed to me to have the sensitivity of a steamroller, and to be just as impervious to human control. There was no point in arguing with Phyllis, however, and it now appeared that Patrick was leaving the table. Learning by example from his mother, he had given his little sister a good wallop on the jaw.

In the kitchen washing dishes with my older sister Mary, I whispered, 'Do you think Mammy was as awful to us as Phyllis is to her kids? In the States he'd have sued her by now.'

'She was worse – certainly with us older ones. She never sent you and Annie down the field to cut your own sticks for a whipping. Talk about Gestapo tactics.'

She paused and looked at me.

'No need to look stricken. We survived it and I know it must have been dreadful here, a houseful of kids and no one around all day, unless Da brought gangs in for dinner from the other farm. I think she must have been terribly lonely.'

'Lonely? But you could never get away from anyone here.'

Mary sighed ruefully. 'You can't get much more lonely than being stuck with small children. I sometimes think that Uncle Ray's visits were the only thing that kept her going. Another adult to talk to.'

I remembered how much I had always hated Uncle Ray's visits. How her attention had removed itself from us to devote it to this man talking about Africa. How we had had to sit on his knee and how when he pinched our cheeks it hurt. But it must have meant a contact with another world for our mother, trapped in talk of

nothing but farming. I remembered the trouble I had got into when I repeated a piece of graffiti I had seen to him: 'Idi Amin could be your Black Baby.'

Annie came over, flicking drops from a dishcloth.

'Did you know that Father Ray is setting up his home movies in the parlour? I don't think it's safe, myself. If we turn off all the lights we might find him with a pitchfork stuck between his shoulder-blades when they come on again. And think of the number of suspects!'

'Well, at least it beats talking to anyone,' I said wearily. We adjourned to the parlour, Annie muttering to herself: 'I can do my meditation while the lights are off, anyway.'

The pictures flickered across the fly-speckled screen. Little girls with toothy smiles and their dresses tucked into their knickers waded across the river; little boys looked self-conscious as the camera zoomed in on their First Communion suits. The younger generation found it hilarious.

'God, look at that haircut.'

'Dad, I can't believe you let them put you in those trousers.'

'Aunt Kate looks like she wants to kill someone.'

They were right, I had wanted to kill Uncle Ray, all-powerful and invisible behind the camera. The film changed to Uncle Ray's missions in Africa and everyone fell asleep.

When the lights came on, I blinked at the drowsy middle-aged figures in the armchairs. The children in the screen seemed much more real.

The parlour had hardly changed over the years – the stuffed pheasant, moulting badly, still stood on the piano in its glass case. The pin-mould behind it had spread since my mother's death, a patch of black on the crimson. The cushions on the chairs were lumpier than I remembered, and despite the huge fire in the hearth it still felt damp and cold. An impossible house to heat; my father was right to leave.

I moved closer to the fireplace. The carved wooden overmantel had always fascinated me. It was made up of little sections of glass inset into heavy mahogany frames and each frame had a

photograph stuck into the edge of the wood. It was like a shrine to family history, filled with dead relatives, family guardians, family ghosts: Aunt Hester, Uncle Thomas, grandmother. Now my mother had joined them up there. She was smiling faintly, a young girl before her marriage. So much younger than I. Behind her my sharp face looked back, flushed with heat and alcohol.

Uncle Ray's face, redder than mine, appeared over my shoulder. I shifted slightly.

'I remember when that picture was taken – it was at Lough Derg, we did the pilgrimage together. Your mother was a lovely woman, a walking saint.'

Oh Christ. Anything was better than listening to this man recite a litany of my mother's virtues. I said, 'Reckon the numbers are down on the walking saints these days. How's business, anyway?'

If I expected him to wince at my terminology, I was to be disappointed. Probably priests held sales conferences now. His head bobbed up and down.

'Not good, not good at all. The numbers at Mass have really gone down. There is a terrible secularism creeping into Irish society, a loss of spiritual values. All the money has had an awful effect on the people of Ireland.'

Nothing to do with clerical scandals and paedophile priests, of course. The words would not come out; I couldn't say them. I moved away abruptly.

In a corner, two of my brothers were discussing the fall-off in cattle prices. Another subject best avoided; I had already had an argument with one of them about the origins and implications of mad cow disease. My father watched them from his chair, no longer knowing enough to lay down the law. I went to him.

'Well Da. How's the form?'

'Terrible hot in here. Senseless putting all that turf on the fire.'

'Care for another whiskey?'

'Sure I might as well before it's all drunk on me.'

One for him, a very large one for me.

He called me as I poured. 'Mary.'

'It's Kate, Da.'

'Don't give me any ice, just water.'

'Okay.'

We sipped our drinks in silence. I wanted to ask him how he felt about leaving the house, but he just stared through me, intent on my brothers' conversation. Phyllis had opened the piano and had begun to sing 'The Wild Rover'.

'I'll go home to my parents, confess what I've done
And I'll ask them to pardon the prodigal son.
And when they've caressed me as oft-times before
Then I never will play the wild rover no more.'

Da was right. It was way too hot. I went out of the parlour. There was a child screaming in the kitchen and I moved beyond it onto the back porch. Outside, the night was very quiet and calm. It would still be day in California. Perhaps I could ring Steve, but what could I say to him? I took an old red anorak – my mother's – from a hook. No one would notice if I disappeared for a while.

Already the evening had set hard into a grip of frost. Moving away from the house to where the path led down to the river, I watched the first stars light up the deep blue of the sky. Mary's Mantle, the nuns had called it in an unusual moment of poetry sandwiched between exhortations to keep pure and learn shorthand. A little way down the slope I could distinguish the white bulk of a rock, dug out from under a standing stone and rolled down the hill where it could not block the ploughing. I had come here as a child, wrapping my arms around the cold whiteness for comfort. I had come here on the day of my mother's funeral when I could cry no more, and sat in the rain until I was frozen to the bone. Now, pulling myself onto it, I felt as ancient as the rock itself, immeasurably old and weary, as heavy as the earth beneath. I could still hear the sound of singing from the house:

But come ye back, when summer's in the meadow
Or when the valley's hushed and white with snow,
'Tis I'll be there in sunlight or in shadow . . .'

A small cold breeze came from across the river where a light still shone in the church.

Sheila Farrell would be finishing the cleaning, saying a last few

prayers before she went back to her lonely house. 'Walking around with her nose up the priest's arse.'

Another of my mother's sayings . . . Oh Father Ray, wasn't she too earthy for a walking saint?

Now she was in the graveyard across the river, away from the firelit house and the crying children. She was lying still in the frozen ground where no sound or song could reach her, and she was dead. The familiar hills surrounded her as they surrounded me, but no matter which world I was in, in Ireland or America, I could not touch her. The light in the church went out. Sheila Farrell was going home.

Clutching the stone, I stared up at the stars, long-dead worlds still holding their light. Points of brightness growing stronger in the increasing blackness, blurring with my tears into silver rivers. If I went back, it would be warm and bright in California, wouldn't it?

'Lighten up' I said to the sky.

'Lighten up.'

MOLLY McCLOSKEY

Dust

It wasn't right, what happened. How they sat around the Christmas tree together and didn't tell them. How they swapped gifts and feigned surprise and couched sentiment in gentle sarcasm and never said. As though they could just skip that part without really affecting the plot.

The night before, they'd been to midnight mass – Helen, John and their three grown children – attending in the spirit in which they might've attended a bake sale or church bazaar. With an indulgent, half-ironic wink, as though Catholicism were one more quaint suburban custom which, in their worldliness, they had outgrown. On the way home, the snow had fallen heavily, provoking in all of them a near-reverential silence that the service, with its jostling and acrid smell of drink, had not. As the car moved smoothly through the white streets, Helen saw split-rails, lamp-posts and bike racks, their sharp points rendered soft, and imagined an air of mutability attaching to the truth.

Bill suggested building a snowman and his father floodlit the yard, so that it shone a sunny yellow. Bill and Nathan and Louise started rolling balls of snow, their suddenly purposeful activity like that of people mobilised in a crisis. The glowing tips of cigarettes waved about by their gloved, gesticulating hands putting their mother in mind of lightning bugs. Some miraculous mid-winter visitation.

In ways, Helen felt herself an almost objective witness to the proceedings, as though the project were less an off-the-cuff response to snowfall than a sort of Rorschach test. And she waited, curious, to see would the balls come out round, or would they amass wobbly and misshapen. Amazed, in the end, to find them perfect spheres of unsullied snow.

'I motion,' Nathan said, 'we call him Frosty.'

'Frosty?' Louise said. 'Kind of corny.'

'Exactly. *Not.*'

'Ooh,' Bill said, 'I get it. Like we're . . . beyond corny. We're *post*-corny.'

'Post-that, even,' Nathan said. 'Which is why we can call him Frosty without succumbing to either gluey naïvety, or bitter irony.'

'Hear, hear.'

'Is it possible,' Louise said, 'to be post-ironic?'

'It is,' Bill said, 'but . . .'

'Here we go . . .'

'. . . then you'd be a mailman in Athens.'

'Brrrrbb-Tchuu!' Nathan air-drummed an imaginary cymbal.

Helen wished her children wouldn't talk like this. She felt strangely undermined by their irreverence; she took it personally. She knew that by *gluey naïvety*, they were referring to that era in which she would have been just about the age Louise was now. When they *would've* named a snowman Frosty without having to deconstruct the impulse. But everything with them was double-speak, at least.

'I motion,' she said cheerily, 'that we go inside.'

'Good idea,' John said. John. She'd forgotten he was there.

I motion, she felt like adding, for gluey naïvety.

Inside, they compared airline food and Nathan described, with disproportionate passion, something new he'd discovered you could do with sage. Then a discussion she couldn't follow about red meat and acids and arthritis. Nathan had recently become a vegetarian.

'I don't know what you're worried about red meat for when you're smoking those,' John said, pointing to the butts in the ashtray.

'I know, I know. But that's not the only reason, my health; it's, you know, immoral. Killing animals.'

'You a Buddhist?' Bill asked.

'*Are* you a Buddhist?' Louise said.

Nathan squirmed visibly. 'Well,' he said, 'I've been doing a bit of, a bit of Buddhism all right, yeah.'

'A . . . bit . . . of . . . Buddhism,' Bill said. 'Hunh. I've heard of à la carte Catholicism.'

Nathan noticed his father eyeing him suspiciously, as though waiting on the admission of some further perversion. Homosexuality, perhaps, or nipple-piercing. It was strange, when Nathan was alone or with friends or even with a woman, he felt fine: physical, substantial, masculine enough. He was strong after all, and tall, his musculature pulled taut over the rack of his frame. But in the presence of his father he felt lacking in density. Wispy, inconsequential, disappointing even. As though he were somehow letting down the side.

'So what do you do?' his father said. 'Do you . . . meditate . . . or what? What does a Buddhist do?'

'I'm not a Buddhist.' Nathan sighed. 'I'm just investigating.'

'But I'm asking. Like, what makes someone a Buddhist? As opposed to –'

'As opposed to, say, a travelling salesman,' Bill said.

'The practice of Buddhism,' Nathan said, ignoring his brother. 'Obviously.'

'Oh boy.' His father clapped his palms to his thighs. 'We're getting nowhere. Why so defensive, Nate?'

'John.'

'What? I'm only asking.'

'Drop it,' Helen said. 'It's his business.'

'Funny timing, that's all,' he went on. 'He picks Christmas Eve to tell us he's not a Christian any more. Not that I mind. It's his life.'

'I agree with you there,' Louise said. 'Religion's really personal. It's like being gay or something. Nobody else's business.'

John looked at Louise. Nathan smiled. Now his father thought Louise might be that way too. Even Bill was silent.

'Oh God,' Louise said, rolling her eyes. 'I was just making a point. Lighten up, Dad. You too, Neanderthal.'

'Like you said, it's nobody's business. I'm just marvelling,' Bill said, 'at the profundity of your observations. Religion is like being gay. In terms of promiscuity, I assume you mean.'

'You know what I mean,' Louise said. 'It's personal. Only you can choose your religion.'

'I beg to differ with you. If there're two things in this world that are not personal, they are religion and sex.'

'Well, they should be.'

'Ah, that's different.'

'I think,' Helen said, 'it's that time.'

'Yeah,' John said, though he hadn't taken his eyes off his daughter.

While John and Louise and Bill headed for bed, Nathan helped his mother carry beer bottles, wineglasses, ashtrays into the kitchen. She could've told him then. There had never been any small talk between the two of them, nothing she'd had to get beyond, or beneath, to reach him. But she didn't. Instead, they talked of the past. Nathan seemed keen to reminisce and almost puzzled by the fact. Sitting in the kitchen with her son, Helen had the odd – though not completely alien – sensation that it was him she was married to. That the two of them might easily be sitting around after a party, husband and wife, performing a post-mortem on the evening, or on their own lives. But when they said good-night and she embraced him, he felt – despite his size – so young to her.

John didn't stir when she climbed into bed, but she knew he was awake. 'It's Christmas,' she said into the darkness.

'Mmm.'

'Christmas.'

'Go to sleep, Helen.'

She found that lately, what she'd acquired in place of the pain was a certain philosophical remove. As though this marriage had been a bold new experiment in living, and this not so much its tragic end as the point at which they sat back and analysed the data. What was its natural life span? By what conceivable means might that be extended? The appearance of children, perhaps, or their reappearance at seasons of peak sensitivity. We are cosmonauts, she thought, stepping bulkily out the hatch of our spacecraft, filled with yarns from the beyond. Well. You get through it how you can.

What John would say is this: What I don't get, he'd say, is where love goes.

While what baffled her was not that it went, but how quickly

and with what apparent ease. True, they'd been together for more years than most, but she could count on her fingers those first pristine days. When they'd known just enough about each other to insist on knowing more. Why?

Why that dumb, blind insistence on knowledge, that belief that it'd be good for you? And then, of course, there was another question. What did you then do with what you knew? That's what makes or breaks you, Helen thought. Because it seemed to her that this was not stupid – this insistence on participation in a life that was bound to disappoint you – but indomitable. What was stupid was avoiding knowledge, or pretending not to have it. Imagining you could strip away the dross and get at that shining thing you think you once were.

You needed, she knew, those first days, in order to come as far as you have. But you shouldn't need them back.

'But where does it come from,' John was saying. 'I mean, what makes dust?'

That day, so soon into their marriage, when she'd asked him for help around the house. He'd gone over the room, running his index finger along flat surfaces, pressing and rolling the dust between his thumb and first finger, apparently aghast.

'Hunh,' he'd said. 'Hunh.'

'Give me the rag,' she'd said finally. Exasperated, but not exactly nasty.

'No, I just –'

'I'll do it,' she'd said.

She felt sent-up, patronised. But is it possible she mistook his tone? Read put-on bafflement where there'd been genuine wonder. So that whatever part of it was real – and undoubtedly some part of it was – got crushed fairly early on. Not out of cruelty or impatience, but more likely fear. And they had then no vocabulary for fear. But this lack of earthing in him did frighten her, the need he seemed to have for escape, the way he could lose himself in the minutiae at the expense of the big things, the solid things. The way he could see a whole cosmos in a moment and burrow there. So that what she felt she had to do was drag him back. Treat this tendency of his with repeated disregard, though

by doing so she unwittingly played her part in the evolution of their marriage. What best served them, they encouraged, and whatever served less obvious purpose, they discarded. And neither of them noticed how this process was shaving them of so many nuances.

What if, instead, she'd indulged him, gone along with his half-real, half-put-on amazement. Called his bluff, as it were. She might've written his name with her finger on the dusty mantel and then slowly, teasingly, pushed the rag across it. As though just like that, she could forget his name. She might've talked of earth, or death. Sunbeams. Snow on the shoulders of his overcoat. The word *motes*. She wouldn't, in the end, have been able to answer his question, but this he would not have noticed. Because an answer wasn't exactly what he was looking for. Because John, at that time, was still capable of a wide-eyed curiosity, and all he really wanted just then was a little company in his wonder.

But let's not blame Helen. What about her? What did she need? Some reassurance in her fear, perhaps. She might've needed to know that these flights of fancy didn't mean he wasn't rooted there, with her. That they could even include her. In order to stop pulling him back, she needed to know he wasn't going anywhere. And it wouldn't have cost him much, really, just to say to her: I'm here.

There is not much time left in this marriage. Two weeks, maybe three. A month if they soften. They'll survive the New Year, with all its mandatory melodrama. They will get saddeningly, necessarily drunk. At a party, they will somehow summon up the energy to engage in the usual round of tired flirtations. It's possible there will be one or two old lovers there, on his side or on hers. These people will appear to them as old photographs of themselves sometimes do, from the seventies. Comical, almost theatrical get-ups they once took seriously. At midnight, John and Helen will embrace and one of them – it's hard to say which – will say *I'm sorry*, just as the other one is saying *Happy New Year*. In the midst of this embrace they will feel they are holding tight to their secret and for this reason they will find it hard to let go. It is, they'll know, the last secret they are ever likely to share.

They won't fight. They are beyond fighting. But in the taxi on the way home they will slip into a morose silence and an image will present itself to Helen. It is of January, people going their separate ways. Like the cast of a play after an unusually long and surprisingly successful run. Already there's that sense of depletion, extrication. Of being not in the moment, but a step ahead of it.

But that's a few days down the road. Right now, it's Christmas, and waking up this morning, Helen and John realise what a disastrous idea this was, this gathering of their clan, how finely they've tuned their masochism.

There is a knock on the bedroom door, a complicated one. It's a Christmas carol, but unrecognisable. Rhythm was never in the genes.

'Are you decent,' Bill asks. 'Can we come in?'

'We're decent,' John says.

Louise is carrying a tray, with toast and coffee and freshly squeezed juice. Bill has taken two balls from the tree and hooked them on his ears.

Helen rolls her eyes at him and smiles. 'Where did we get them,' she says to John.

'Don't worry,' Bill says, 'we're only the warm-up act. There are tassel-breasted women waiting in the yard.'

'Not again,' John says.

'I'm afraid so.'

Louise and Nathan stand waiting.

'This is so . . . sweet,' Helen says. 'This is so sweet of you.'

'It was my idea,' Louise says.

'Was not.'

'Was too.'

'The breakfast,' Nathan says, with undue solemnity, 'was Louise's idea.'

'Thank you, dear,' his sister says.

Helen looks at Nathan, her middle child. This odd sense of responsibility he bears, even in the midst of jesting. She lets wash over her a truth which normally she keeps at bay. That she loves him more than the other two. Or at least more instinctively. His depths, his way of looking at her, as though for answers. His

heaviness of heart, which she's never understood the source of, but which she feels like a weight on her own shoulders. 'I think I'm going to cry,' she says blankly.

'Oh dear,' John says.

'Mom . . .'

'I hate to see a woman cry,' Bill says.

'Come on.' Nathan nods towards the door. 'Come out whenever you're ready.'

They file out, closing the door behind them and she does cry. But only briefly. Very quickly, she is empty, and her sobbing feels almost staged. As though she has cried on cue and can stop now.

John lifts the tray and clears a space for it on the night stand. He rocks her, briefly, and when her tears cease, withdraws. 'I never thought it would be like this,' he says.

Oh God, she thinks bitterly. She hates it when people say that. What's *it*, anyway? Their lives? Their marriage? Getting old? This morning? Grow up, she feels like saying. Wake . . . the . . . fuck . . . up. 'You never thought *what* would be like *what*?' she says.

'I never thought I'd feel so . . .'

'So what? Ashamed?'

'Can I speak? Please.'

'Speak,' she says, 'speak. By all means, speak.'

'This wasn't my idea, if you recall.'

'My apologies,' she says slowly, 'for having had an idea.'

'Oh don't give me that.'

She flounces – that's the only word for what she does – she flounces about the bed. It's the only movement that comes close to expressing her exasperation with him. With his need to assign blame. With his sudden passivity when things go wrong.

'If it was my idea,' she says, 'it was because I thought it might . . . oh . . .'

'Work?'

'Help.'

'Did you?'

'Did *you*?'

Go on, she thinks, say it: *I asked you first.*

Instead, he softens. Seems to crumple almost, there in the bed

beside her. But not in the usual way, the way that begs her sympathy, makes her feel a hammer to his anvil. He sags perceptibly.

She wants him to say it's over. Or a part of her does. To bump them free of this groove they're in. To say it doesn't matter whose idea it was – this Christmas, this life – this whatever it is they're trying that so obviously is failing. She would like him to admit that this plan has grown heads, and that what he wants more than anything right now is just to give up.

But he won't say it. She knows that. Kingdom could come and he still wouldn't say it.

'I don't know what I thought,' he says finally. 'I honestly don't know.'

In the old days, she knows, you held back because you cared. And in the even older days you didn't have to hold back, because the stuff just wasn't there, there was no score-card yet. You made untold allowances for each other's feelings. You hardly even knew you did it and you certainly never mentioned it. But pretty soon you wanted credit for all those allowances you'd made. You wanted gratitude, and from there it was only one step to the place where you just didn't make them any more.

He is sparing their feelings, even at this late stage. And is that so bad? It's not denial, after all. It's more, what's the point in cruelty? Do we really need to draw a map? There is no point, of course. And thank God, she thinks. They might be beyond crying, but they are also beyond cruelty. What the kids might call *post-caring*. Where it doesn't matter that it doesn't matter any more. It's a kind of negative space, a non-event, a deprivation of the senses, or emotions. It's what people mean when they say of each other: *there's just nothing there.*

She rises from the bed and looks down at him. Something passes between them, something not altogether bad. A sort of subliminal handshake. They feel unconscionably heroic and, strangely, free. They feel something centuries old, aeons beyond this bedroom: honour in the admission of defeat.

She takes her robe from its hook and shuts the bathroom door behind her. On the night stand the coffee's gone cold. John looks at it wistfully, and not without guilt. As though it were

someone's school project he'd let fall behind the fridge and then forgotten.

Their gifts to one another this year are, as if by prior arrangement, empty of any suggestion of the future. Of anything they might share in or admire on one another or build upon together. Gone are the silk scarves of other years, anything in that colour she so loves on him, a vase to hold the flowers he is prone to buying each January, to embolden the grey days ahead.

They exchange instead the obligatory, generic gifts of near-strangers. Bestsellers rather than the leather-bound volume she'd coveted from the old bookstall. A new grip for his racquet rather than his favourite hand towels, which would one day smell of him. Nothing which might reveal what they know of one another's more intimate but less pressing needs. The kids don't notice. But that's the nature of intimacy. That it has its own symbols, which other people can neither read, nor read the absence of.

Late that afternoon, Helen sits at the window, watching. The air is dark blue, the forecast for more snow. Bill and Nathan and Louise are standing outside, drinking hot spiced wine. Written on their faces is ease. Now and then, one of them will form a snowball and heave it in someone else's direction. Half-heartedly and with no malice. Bill and Nathan smoke. Louise, no. Not yet, anyway. In the end, Helen thinks, there's very little we can protect them from.

Bill is waving one arm, then pointing skyward. He's telling a story. About what, Helen cannot imagine. But it's making Louise laugh and Nathan shake his head and smile. They seem to Helen so worldly and at home in themselves. She was never like that. Nor, she thinks, was John. Her kids will make mistakes, she knows, perhaps big ones, but the difference is, they will expect to make them. They won't be stymied by their missteps. They know too much. About economic miracles, rehab, the reinvention of individuals and societies; what, out there, is worth saving and what we only cling to out of fear. Very little will strike these three as cataclysmic and that seems to Helen both a blessing and a sad

flattening of effect. The moon to them is just a place you go if you're very smart and very fit and certifiably sane.

The colours she attaches to each one of them. Louise is all earth tones, that's easy. Olive-green or rich browns. Nathan is sea-blue, but not Caribbean. More dense and still and deep; a latent sort of power. And Bill is like the fierce non-colour of a star. Constant and, though first, the furthest from her. He buys and sells money for a living. What does that even mean? She has heard him speak of people losing millions, but only on paper. Helen doesn't understand, nor does she want to. She can't help thinking it a gross inversion of the natural order, materialism kind of gorging on itself, when you're not even buying products any more, but money with your money. And yet he is still Bill, her son. Capable of gruff but genuine affection and a sense of loyalty which precludes analysis. Certain things just *are* with Bill. He will never understand her and he knows that, but he will come to her if she needs him.

Nathan teaches poor kids. Underprivileged, she means. She keeps picturing him on a reservation, though she knows he lives in a small log cabin in the Appalachians, happy it seems. This is his choice, though it could change tomorrow. Change to them is a byword and no cause for alarm. He, above them all, seems in search of something. Louise less so, but then she's young, only twenty. Lately, she's been talking all the time about Gaia. She tells Helen about the earth and the trees and the flowers and how they all have souls and that only when we accept this can we move beyond this ethos of destruction. She can say this only because she is aware of large-scale destruction, a fact that fills Helen with both envy and regret. This is not her final form, of course. Louise will live through many incarnations. But it's an indication of where, already, her sensibilities lie.

Louise is seated on the hood of the car now, and Bill and Nathan on the low brick wall which contains the flower beds. She's explaining something and they are listening intently. That's another thing. That Louise is not cowed by, or shy of them. She apologises, apparently, for nothing. Not her youth or her sex or whatever statistical information or hard data she may lack. She believes conviction will carry her. And Helen knows these things

are so because of Bill. He set a tone, one lacking in apology or fear, which his sister has adopted and refined. Aside from that, Bill loves Louise. More, Helen knows, than he loves Nathan. And likely, more than Louise realises at her age. Helen knows she owes Bill a debt of gratitude, but still there's this discomfiting sense of distance between them. As though he were a man she knew only in passing, who has delivered her children home safely from summer camp, having taught them the rudiments of survival.

Something fine is taking shape before her. In spite of her, in spite of John. And what the two of them have tried to do is milk that – extract from it some faith or future – and how shameful and transparent their efforts feel. Out there lies proof of certain things. That they lived and loved each other and procreated. That there were other, better times, the fruits of which are out of reach now, as lost to them as the times themselves. Helen and John move about on the perimeter of all this in an almost funereal fog, as though they have swum, spawned and are dying.

She knew today what John wanted. To turn back time and then stop it. If there was to be an apotheosis – a deification of their lives that would make sinful or sacrilegious any attempt at dismantling – it was this morning. In bed or opening presents, with their children at their feet. As though they might wake Christmas morning to find themselves feeling, for the first time in so long, included in their own lives.

But what has instead come clear to them is exactly the opposite of what they'd sought. The separateness from them of their children is so starkly obvious. She and John are at the centre of nothing; they've been left behind. They're in the queer position of people who, knowing they're dying, have thrown a farewell party for their friends. But not wanting to spoil anything – wanting their loved ones unburdened and spontaneous around them – have kept their secret and thus sidelined themselves from any joy. They can neither count on these people to revive them, nor can they count on them, for an overly long period, to mourn their passing. They can't even count on shock. It may not come.

'Dust' is one of a group of three companion stories in which the same events are treated from different characters' perspectives.

EAMON SWEENEY

Leonora's Message

Let Me explain.

Even though you won't like hearing what I have to tell you, I feel compelled to come clean. Especially as the end is near and the intrepid Leonora McNally, aboard the horrifically expensive and wittily named ***Auld Lang Sine***, is busy tunnelling into the event-horizon of the black hole ***rho-Eridani 28***. Especially as, on your behalf, she's about to let the cat out of the bag, spill the beans, blow the whistle, or whatever. No, no, I'm *sorry*, I'm not *blaming* you, because the likelihood – the *inevitability* – that you would do this was written in your stars. Despite the brave assertions of Willy Henley, you are not the masters of your fate nor, indeed, the captains of your souls. So listen up – this is serious stuff.

In the Beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. Well, so far, so good. But then God thought a bad Thought and It was Lucifer, the Morningstar, so to compensate, He rather smartly thought a good Thought and It was Me. We all have Our little ups and downs. (You'll forgive Me if the foregoing is recounted in temporal terms because, quite frankly, you couldn't comprehend it any other way. *You* might be forgiven for thinking that goofs committed in Eternity are eternal but Me? I'm not so sure. I sincerely hope not.)

Anyhow, once these things had come to pass, in My given role as compensator for God's faux-pas, I had no alternative but to remove Myself from Eternity and take It with me. It wasn't easy.

When you think of The Fall your thoughts are coloured by Hollywood. I'm pretty sure you visualise Me grappling with the Lord of the Dunghill in thunderous flurries of wings, sweat-slicked skin and rippling muscles, the pair of Us weaving furiously

amongst the cloud-tops bathed in lambent beams of Divine light. You see serried ranks of lesser angels and multitudes of Cherubim and Seraphim looking on aghast at this war in Heaven. You conjure up the vision of Me striking a mighty blow to cast the Devil down, down, down into the lurid, gloomy vastness of Hell. And I wouldn't be at all surprised if you thought that once I'd done the deed, I just dusted off My hands and flew away into the Divine sunset, grinning virtuously. Sadly, it was not like that at all.

It was much, much less glamorous.

In reality what I had to do was mate with the Misbegotten and sublimate My Essence, what you call My Spirit, into matter. There was no time in the doing nor was there any way in which Eblis could avoid coming with Me, for He was forced to become the mirror-image – matter and antimatter, yin and yang, black and white, good and evil, call it what you will. Nature, to use one of your more coy references to the Godhead, abhors a vacuum.

When We transformed, We created a respectably *large* Monobloc. You want the real figures? How does a hillion, jillion, bazillion grams grab you? (Ask Dave Barry of the *International Herald Tribune* – My sources are, of course, impeccable.) And, as for the temperature, say several trillion degrees Kelvin. Does that sound about right? Good, good. Even if I say so Myself, It was an *Event*.

It is gratifying that you have been able to guess what happened back at the Beginning despite the evidence being so degraded by time. Naturally your mathematical calculations are way out of line because a colossal part of Mephistopheles and My Own Goodself suffered mutual annihilation, matter and antimatter being the capricious things they are. So, extrapolating from present evidence, you've come up with figures that are really much too small. But, no matter – if you will allow Me My little pun.

In the instant of Creation, Divine Law rules. Okay? God's Thoughts cannot extinguish Themselves. The Monobloc exploded, not so much because of the laws of physics (although they were becoming quite important) but because it was imperative that I be separated from the Beast. That instant was the critical one. That instant was the last in which I was integrated

and in control. ***That instant determined the future of the Universe***. For reasons that will become clear presently, I used that instant to imbue matter with what your philosophers have called *numinous* force – an inherent urge in all My subsidiary particles to evolve to a point where My call for help will be heard.

Naturally the slippery bastard, Beelzebub, tried to do the exact opposite and introduce the sinister side to things but fortunately for you he didn't have time to get His influence fully in place. I was the Prime Mover and His counterstroke was weakened by the fact that, at that stage, the Monobloc was already beginning to come apart. Now, perhaps, you begin to understand why good always triumphs over evil – if only just!

Thus, Time began. The long haul of building quantum particles into the elements that you now recognise, took what seemed like for ever. It was, as Joyce might have put it, merely a matter of mustering marks, but it was slo-o-o-o-o-o-w. Over aeons things cooled down, allowing the stars to form from curdling pools and eddies of incandescent gas. And, after them the planets. Abaddon, as is His wont, buggered up a lot of them, so that only about one in a billion ever became congenial to life. Yours was luckier than most and you've guessed most of the story from then on – the flash of lightning that generated simple amino acids in the primordial methane and ammonia soup, followed by their gathering into proteins, then one-celled animals and finally you.

What most of you missed, of course, was *why* these things appeared to *want* to better themselves. And *why* the evolution of life seemed to suffer from periodic hiccups, like the demise of the trilobites and the dinosaurs. The Old One, of course, wiped out the trilobites with a world-wide, lethal, transfecting gene. I'm still pretty pissed that I handed Him that one on a plate, allowing the silly creatures to proliferate until they covered the planetary surface. One sneeze and they *all* caught cold. And speaking of cold, He later went and polished off the dinosaurs with a two-kilometre asteroid that gouged out the Marianas Trench and cloaked the sky in black ash for years.

Despite these set-backs I persevered (or at least My numinosity did) and in the fullness of time the great apes came to be My chosen people. Even they did not have it too easy, for there was

little I could do to prevent the perversions that had crept into the programming – the madness of war, the eating of lesser animals, the progressively more clever parasites and bacteria and viruses. Indeed, I was very fortunate that the homeoboxes remained intact, through countless generations of countless species.

Oh, no, I didn't tell you about the homeoboxes, did I? It really wouldn't have helped if I had, though I can tell you now, now that Leonora has almost wriggled through her personal wormhole in space. Just think about her for a moment. She's the apotheosis of humanity and the pinnacle of evolution, yet she's scared witless. Quite understandably, of course, because she knows she's the first ever human being to try this stunt. She'd probably be even more scared if she was aware that her *species* is the first ever to have tried it! I'd love to be able to tell her that her fear is unwarranted – that she is going home a hell of a lot quicker and less painfully than any of the rest of you – but I can't break the rules. All the same it's a pity that she's too young ever to have heard the song 'You can't get to Heaven in an ol' Ford car'. I know she'd be quite amused.

One end of ***Auld Lang Sine*** has already disappeared into Eternity, though Leonora cannot see that yet. In her world, the intersection of the vessel and Heaven's Gate occurred a fraction of a femtosecond ago – too short a period for the light of the event to travel to her wildly staring, baby-blue eyes. At the speed she is moving it will be another couple of femtoseconds before her body hits the dematerialisation front. And, in My world, that gives Us a few more minutes to while away.

'The homeoboxes,' you say anxiously, 'what about the homeoboxes?'

Well, okay, I'll tell you. You have been exercising your monkey curiosity and playing around with genetic material for some time now, trying to figure out the programme. Some of you have thought it odd that throughout the genetic databank of living things there were certain highly conserved sequences, common to all and apparently immutable. You called them homeoboxes. Now, while it was a little distasteful to think that you had to share parts of the jigsaw with lowly creatures like flatworms and fruitflies, you accepted these anomalies just as you were forced

to accept the other 'gosh numbers' or extraordinary coincidences that you kept stumbling across – like the identical diameter of the Moon and the Sun when seen from the surface of your planet and so on. Oh, sure, you learned to *read* the homeoboxes but then We all know the virtue of hiding something in plain sight. You never got the message. You never saw the writing on the wall. You never understood the 'Mene, mene, tekel upharsin' imprinted on those silent sequences. Thanks be to God.

This is what I referred to earlier. The reason why I imbued matter with its evolutionary potential was because at the Instant of Creation I saw a flaw in My logic. Nobody's perfect, all right? While I knew that the best way to erase Apollyon from Eternity was to keep Him permanently locked in a material Universe, it came to Me that this, by the very nature of things, could not be done. The moment the Monobloc exploded, entropy set in, and the clock started to wind down. And, sure as I made little green apples, We were going to arrive back at point A again – what your physicists jokily refer to as the Big Crunch – where, being forewarned and forearmed, the Prince of Darkness would have no difficulty disengaging from the reformed Monobloc and popping up again to try and screw Eternity. Of course, I would also appear amongst the startled choruses of Cherubim and Seraphim and then We'd dance the same old dance all over again. Or something pretty similar.

So, what was I to do? I did the only thing I could and tried to pass a message on to the Primum Mobile, the Big Enchilada Himself, asking Him to change the rules and let Me off the hook. He is, after all, infinitely inventive and I can't imagine Him letting this farrago go on for ever and ever. And, no, it wasn't just a question of saying pretty please or even a heartfelt prayer because, yet another thing you do not know, God does not hear prayers – neither yours nor even Mine. The only portals of communication between the material Universe, as formed, and the Elysian Fields are the black holes. Yes, yes, of course you are going to ask why I couldn't just sidle up to one and sort of holler through? And the answer is, yet again, Time. By the time the Universe would be old enough for these monsters of annihilation to form I knew I would be too attenuated, too weak, to utter a

peep. So I had to devise a means, an instrument, to pass My message on and the culmination of My efforts is the inestimable human being Leonora McNally. And, in this case the medium *really is* the message.

Watch carefully now. The dematerialisation front is just a micron from the tip of Leonora's slipper as she lies tense and dry-mouthed on the crash-couch; unaware that the bulk of the ship, with all its exquisitely crafted sensors and clever artificial intelligence, has been consumed; unaware that My organised numinosity has already reappeared in Eternity and that God knows something important is coming through. Wait till he reads the homeoboxes. Oh, My dear, dear Leonora, this is so exciting!

No, don't get Me wrong, I'm not being callous. It's not in My Nature. I'm really very proud of Leonora. I'm proud of all of you – to have come so far from such humble beginnings, to have avoided killing yourselves, to have got off the planet and to have developed faster-than-light travel. But, most of all, to have been inexorably drawn to explore the mystery of the black holes. I am eternally grateful to you for having acted as my unwitting couriers and also, of course, I am grateful to those other millions of species who tried so hard, yet failed.

The front is passing through the outer, horny layer of skin on Leonora's beautiful little toes – dead cells with withered nuclei, so no message there – but when it gets to the living cells a few microns on, that's when the fun will start. I hope this finally sorts the whole thing out. I sincerely hope . . .

Let Me explain.

Even though you won't like hearing what I have to tell you, I feel compelled to come clean. Especially as the end is near and the intrepid Leonie O'Malley, aboard the horrifically expensive and wittily named ***Sine on Dotted Line***, is busy tunnelling into the event-horizon of the black hole ***RR Lyrae 17β***. Especially as, on your behalf, she's about to let the cat out of the bag, spill the beans, blow the whistle, or whatever. . .

SHANE HARRISON

The Madonna of the Streets

The high arched roof of the arcade was set with thick squares of opaque glass that never told the colour of the sky, but they did serve to amplify any light that chanced above the city and on bright days would glare down painfully like suns. The whole arcade, in fact, functioned like an amplifier for the elements. On hot days it had the swelter of the Casbah, other days it would host visiting winds from Siberia or Archangel, and on busy days shoppers' footfalls, hawkers' cries and buskers' songs mingled in the tunnel and rose to an unbearable din.

But the canopy did keep the rain at bay, at least for those who had their pitch a reasonable distance from the towering entrance portals. Rafe was not one of those; being newly back in town he had to content himself with the margins – time, muscle and talent would eventually change that. As for now, he huddled deeper into his duffel coat, pulled up the hood and waited, waited like a monk for alms.

The place had come to remind him of an airport, having that same strange cocktail of anticipation and boredom, of comings and goings; but it was one airport where he seemed unable to book a flight out. He had once said that to Jenny, in the long, hurt postamble to their relationship.

'A bit like life,' she had said.

He had been unprepared for pathos. 'Life is like an airport?'

'No. Like waiting for a flight out.' But she wasn't going to argue, she had smiled in the pause, then patted his ruffled brow. 'It doesn't matter.'

Rafe still had these conversations with her inside his head, looking for the clue, the one rough grain of sand that would lodge in the waist of the hourglass and arrest time's ceaseless down-

ward flow. Or simply searching for a last rebuttal to leave him vindicated.

A passer-by gave him a worried nod and then, as an afterthought (or perhaps to prevent this leering man from following him) dropped a coin in the chalk circle at Rafe's feet. The coin sang briefly, though more sweetly than its tuppence worth deserved, and this reminder of commerce brought him back to earth. Meanwhile, at the far entrance arch, Dave the busker struck up 'Memphis Blues Again'.

It was one of his best Madonnas, ochre and umber, opalescent white highlights dancing on her skin, almond eyes that looked down gently on the child who was just an outline in her arms. There was only one thing missing; to be accurate it was twice missing, but it was one deliberate omission.

'Where is the halo on the Virgin?'

Rafe was sorely tempted to make a crude reply to that question, but the gaunt-faced priest would probably not have understood the word. Besides, the holy man was shabby, streetworn, so there was a vague kindred between them that demanded respect.

'The Holy Family, young man' – the words wheezed from purple lips – 'must – always – have – a – halo.' He raised a bony finger heavenward for emphasis and Rafe's eyes meekly followed. Perhaps the canopy would have transformed itself into an echo of the Sistine Chapel, a ceiling alive with celestial beings carried aloft on the columns of commerce while the workaday street noise became a heavenly choir. But it remained blank, pitilessly modern and devoid of all meaning.

Rafe's eyes fell back to his Madonna. He knew what he had drawn on the pavement, even an inkling of why he had drawn it, crouched until he thought his back would snap; if anyone deserved a halo it was himself. Not her, certainly not around that guileful and beautiful face which had its own radiance and didn't require any ethereal lampshade.

'It is complete,' Rafe said, and then, with a veiled hint, 'and she is only a poor Madonna on the street.'

The priest huffed at this. 'She would shed a tear then, down here among the sinners.'

Perhaps the priest would have preferred, Rafe thought, those kitsch and sentimental paintings sold in cheap stores; gilt-framed paintings of street urchins with one giant crystal tear poised on their baby cheeks. Picturesque poverty to be found only in rambling minds, not here, in this alley, where snot-nosed beggars could swipe his day's takings if he wasn't careful.

'There's no room for halos here,' was all he muttered.

But the priest only smiled, as though he understood, and his fondness for Rafe's Madonna seemed to grow. Rafe looked at him in amazement, he knew then what the priest was going to do and there was no way of stopping it. There would be no donation but, in his own priestly way, the man of the cloth was staking claim to the work. Stepping back a pace, but managing to remain an island in the throng, he solemnly blessed the mother and child and then, without fuss, faded from the arcade.

Rafe was left with a truly holy picture, a fact that did not appeal to him too much. There was a chancer who frequented the arcade peddling cigarette-card pictures of the saints – 'Holy picture, sir; holy picture, miss,' was his monotonous and wheedling refrain. He was able-bodied, young, well kitted out – he was capable; but posing as a beggar he could rival Rafe's takings for the day with negligible effort.

'Here, why don't you paint me a Virgin and I'll show you how to sell her?' he had first joked by way of introduction. Rafe had told him where he intended inserting such a chalked paving slab and that had put an abrupt end to any potential friendship. They remained on sneering terms. But maybe he should have employed the Holy Picture Man as his marketing manager, since he frequently found that his takings were in inverse proportion to the quality of his work.

He brushed at his slab, as though checking for any damage it might have suffered in the blessing. It was still whole, she still shone on him – perhaps this latter fact was what kept his chalk ring so nearly empty; he was painting for himself, not for them.

One more cup of coffee for the road
One more cup of coffee and we'll go
To the valley below.

He would kill Dave, that one brought it all back, and he remembered they had even thrown coins at the busker to get him to play it again. How many coffees had he and Jenny drunk together? In plastic cups from the clapped-out machine in the Art College common room, greasy with cream in Buswells as they laughed at floridly drunk politicians, or in Bewley's as group arguments raged over the meaning of art, of life, of all the things of which they knew nothing. And coffee gone cold in his ragged bedsit as they made love in front of a long dead fire . . .

It was raining now and the first umbrellas pirouetted above the crowd in the street outside like a drunken black ballet. A gusting wind blew spray to where Rafe crouched and he cursed, there was no point in continuing with this. Better to take the busker's advice – he scraped petulantly at the coins in his circle, his numbed fingers barely able to gather the smaller change of his miserable bounty. Enough for a coffee or two, or a coffee and a scone – and then a fifty-pence piece clattered onto the ground beside him.

It belonged, had belonged, to a pair of Doc Martens – a new pair of Doc Martens.

He had first seen them yesterday on the feet of the Holy Picture Man and now realised, with black mirth, that he had sunk to such depths that he could recognise people by their shoes.

'Happy Christmas.' The Holy Picture Man was lording it, it had been a good day for selling saints.

'And a prosperous New Year,' Rafe said mildly, as he placed one knee over the coin in a form of genuflection.

The Holy Picture Man shoved both hands deeper into his pockets, lewdly jingling his change. 'Tell me,' he asked, 'what do you call her?'

'The Madonna of the Streets.'

'Not the Virgin on the Rocks?' He smirked at his own little joke. 'I was just curious. But the child, you haven't given a name to the child . . .'

Rafe darkened, his body clenched. The Holy Picture Man was no fool; he backed off a pace and took a hand from his pocket to raise it in a pacifying gesture. 'I was just curious.' Then, ever the jester, he took the wad of pictures from his other pocket and, fanning them, held them out to Rafe.

'Pick a card,' he said. 'Any card.'

Rafe wasn't playing, and so he flicked one, seemingly at random, landing it on Rafe's knee – the one covering the coin.

It landed face down and Rafe, always ready for the sign, took his eyes off his tormentor and picked up the card. The Holy Picture Man took this opportunity to slope off towards the street, leaving Rafe to glare after him. He had turned over the picture. It was St Jude, patron saint of lost causes.

Happy Christmas? It was the end of November but already the good-cheer mob was limbering up. As Rafe pocketed his money and left the arcade he heard the loudspeaker of a nearby record shop give tidings of comfort and joy.

Comfort and Joy.

He would not look back, he must escape from that face, that thing in her arms; everything that slumbered and festered in the past. If the wind blew in more rain it would melt that image; but that had been the case before and still he had returned to the same spot to see her ghost, their ghosts, cling palely to the ground at his feet. Waiting, waiting for his hands to etch colour into their contours, breathe life into them as if he was Prometheus on the river bank.

Like all artists he lived vicariously through his work, or else transferred his experience to the images he wrought – but obliquely, hiding the trail from even himself. Either way life became something that passed him by, for, even if he sometimes chewed on the finer cuts of life, life itself – that bloated beast – could graze or gallop far beyond him, into meadows which he would never reach. It was he, Rafe, who was the grain of sand lodged in the waist of the hourglass, and in all this time spent smouldering on a broken dream a year had passed.

God rest ye merry gentlemen and listen while I say
That Mary's boychild Jesus Christ was born on Christmas Day . . .

It was the damp chill at which November excels, yet Rafe remembered the wait as being suspended in a globe of sunshine. Perhaps that was because there were Cordiline trees in the garden adjacent to the doctor's house, shaking their shaggy heads like palm trees on a beach, and a white wooden veranda that came straight from Regency days – all conspired to make him feel cocooned from that cold and windy day as he awaited the tidings of Jenny's visit.

Tidings of Comfort and Joy . . .

And the dusty boards on which he walked opened like a trapdoor over a chasm as he saw Jenny rush towards him. She was eight weeks gone and the baby would arrive in the high, high summer of July. They hugged, two drowning people holding on for love and terror in the barren ocean. Suddenly, what seemed to have shrivelled up and died was now ubiquitous and spoke its name again at every corner, echoed in every footfall and rustled in every leaf.

So even Rafe, the cynic and the swaggart, mellowed into smiles and radiated the true strength of giving and contentment. This was when he had first begun his Nativity scenes, by way of thanks, in humility, in all honesty. He had borne the scorn of friend and foe, who jibed that he had found Jesus, or that Jesus had found him – but it was someone else, inside himself, that he had found.

And inside Jenny a universe, a spiral galaxy moved and threw an arm outward against the blackness.

Joy.

The last note sank dull and discordant as Rafe pushed through the door of Bewley's Oriental Café and clumped, almost blindly, across the tiled floor of the foyer. It was hot and he felt unwell. The displays of handmade sweets and chocolates along one wall seemed impossible, a bad surrealist joke in this empty-bellied city,

and he steadied himself against the brass rail of the self-service counter until the colours died down a pace.

An old woman nudged his elbow – 'Follow the queue, love.' He followed, meekly, took a sticky bun from the shelf because it was convenient and ordered coffee from the girl.

He looked around for a face he might know amongst the poets and the plotters and the office girls, but there was no one – and everyone. Jumbled and spinning like the faces on coins, the priest, the Holy Picture Man and Dave the busker were hunched over coffees and sniggering at their connivance in bringing him here. At a table in the corner, alone and sullen, sat Jenny.

'I've booked a flight out,' she said, with the same eerie melancholy with which she always said it.

Rafe said nothing, stirring brown sugar from sachets into the frothy mess.

'There's no future for us. We're hiding from it, hiding from our . . .' But her words trembled and would not come.

'I'm sorry,' he said, and in taking the blame had locked them for ever in the past. Her image shimmered and dissipated, and outside, above the arcade, a sliver of rainwater found its way through a chink in the glass and fell towards the pavement below.

If only he had told her to her face that he was sorry and so much more, or maybe the trouble was that his eyes had said it a million times. When first she had bled, on New Year's Day, he had felt that pip of dread grow to a stone, then a fist as they both slumped wounded about the flat for a week. Then, just when hope seemed bolstered by time, it had happened – the red and tiny, useless birth, like a parcel of liver on a butcher's table.

They had been methodical, calm, placing the remains in a glass jar which they wrapped in a swaddling of plastic bags. She had held it close, beneath her coat, on the slow and painful walk to the hospital, wordless, handing it like a gift to the nurse when they reached the ward. Then Rafe had stood in the comfortless waiting room, the bare bulb hanging dead, the only light a moonlike glow through the glass hatch from the next room and the sparkling tips of numerous cigarettes.

A nurse had placed the glass jar in the hatch window and for a while its red lantern glow had held him fascinated, then he longed

for them to take it and, finally, turned away. Out over the roof-tops and chimney-stacks, the jungle of television aerials, he searched out the stars that held the sky in place, and waited for a falling star, and waited . . .

It was over now, he was sorry – and still the buzz inside his head accused him. The priest leered past: 'Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa,' and pointed to the ceiling where saints swirled and looked sombrely down. He recognised St Jude, whose face came closer. 'I've given up on you,' he said and, laughing, turned into the Holy Picture Man.

'You've got to give the child a name,' he said, and held out a card with Rafe's own likeness on it in the style of an icon. 'A name, you've got to give it a name.'

'And a halo,' added the priest. 'And a tear.'

'If you give it a name it will all be over, like a disappearing universe it will swirl back to nothing at its cusp. It will be complete.'

Rafe searched desperately for Jenny's face, somewhere in the crowd or in his mind, but she was gone and he could not conjure her up again. His eyes felt hollow, fastening onto nothing until they found the priest's glaucous eyes. Holding the stare until they were alone in the café, Rafe felt himself dwindle in size to the slightness of a boy while the priest grew and grew until he loomed over him like a huge granite statue. Slowly the priest raised his right arm in blessing. 'It's all over now,' he soothed.

Rafe shut his eyes and recalled the earlier scene in the arcade, the blessing dropped on his precious drawing, all the rage he had nurtured welled up inside him and . . .

'Never!' He banged the table and felt the ensuing silence as poets and plotters and office girls turned to look at the wild man exploding. Rafe's eyelids snapped open to reveal to him the world he knew, or once knew, and he smiled as he saw their stares dip and avoid him as the murmur grew louder to hide their embarrassment.

Outside it was raining heavily and the streets were emptying as the crowds evaporated like mist. On the high arched roof of the arcade the rain flowed in a steady rivulet through the crack in a

square of thick glass. It fell endlessly to the floor below, a solid silver rod piercing heaven and earth. Where it fell there had been a chalk circle with 'Thank You' written in neat serifed letters and beside that, worked exquisitely in chalk, a Madonna and child. It was one of his best Madonnas, ochre and umber, the child an outline in her arms . . .

TESS MARTIN

Taboo

It strikes me sometimes, especially in the night, that I'll never get the fellow out of my mind. He's been squatting there for such a long time. I'm worn out with dreams of Jackie Kyle.

We were at the same primary school for a time. He joined in his last year. Had to repeat a year it seems. Something about home problems.

Always taller than the rest of us. Lots taller. Long, freckly arms straining well below the sleeves of a scruffy draught-board jumper. Foxy-red hair standing upright.

We moved on together to the secondary school just across the road. Still the same fella, though. No uniform. No PE kit. Not even football boots.

'Where's your sports bag, Kyle?' the form teacher asked.

The answer came dead slow. 'Sittin' at home waitin' for somethin' to go into it . . . Sir.'

He was useless at school. Only in the Art Class. He could draw animals and birds like no one in that group had ever done. Once he drew a large cat, his own cat Moxie, he explained. Glaring through green eyes, straight off the page, loathing what it saw, plotting revenge. When I watched it I swear I could feel its claws piercing my skin. I could taste blood when I licked my wrist.

'Great, Kyle! Brilliant, that! Nearly afraid to pass by your desk,' Mr Keane, the Art Master, joked. 'Stay behind after school, I have a book . . .'

'Can't, Sir. Seein' the Head. Commendation due!'

The class laughed until their sides ached.

He spent a lot of time sitting outside Mr Wilson, the Headmaster's room. Whistling softly between his teeth. Or humming under his breath. Bob Seger and the Silver Bullet Band's 'I'm

exactly as you see, take a chance on me'. That was his favourite music those times.

Then he'd swagger down the corridor, back to the classroom, smiling behind his eyes.

It was the quietness about him people first noticed. A sort of stillness. 'It's the fishin',' he explained to me. 'Sittin' alone on a river bank, not darin' to move an eyelid, afraid of chasin' the trout.'

It irritated many of the staff.

I used to think he would have slipped through that school easy – well, easier. Got together some bits of uniform from the school shop. Made some effort to appear interested. But, thinking back, I'm not so sure. For now I have the notion that he forced that staff to take notice, not because he looked different, but because he didn't care.

'We're outcasts, you and me.' He'd grin, sitting in the playground, hugging those scrawny knees of his. I suppose we were, too. Though my isolation was less obvious. It's just that I had eczema since a little girl. Mostly on my hands. And had to wear special gloves. White, waxy, waterproof ones that I loathed. Felt like a monster, I did.

I have a brother, Dan, three years younger than me. One evening over supper he asked, wide-eyed, 'Mum, who's the 'oul doll?'

'Who's asking?' She was bemused.

'Jackie Kyle.' He nodded across at me. 'Your mate, Annie.'

Dad straightened his tie. Coughed lightly. 'And who do you think it is, Daniel?' He stared at the boy.

Dan shrugged. 'You know, Mum, that morning I left my lunch at home and you brought it to school. You sort of kissed me. Well, that Jackie Kyle, he called across from the big playground, "Hey Kiddo, I'm nearly thirteen years of age and I've never kissed the 'oul doll yet." '

'Well, yes.' Dad placed his knife and fork with great precision, exactly parallel on the table-cloth. 'Now then, yes. That will be the Kyle boy. Lives in that derelict caravan off the Mill Road, that lay-by there. No father. Mother . . . frequently absent. A type of reject actually. I don't want him mentioned in this house again. His name is taboo.'

Dad's a governor in our school. He knows it all.

Mum? She went very pink. I watched her move the sugar bowl aside and clear a spot to scribble a little note to herself on a serviette, 'Ask Head about A's friend'. Then she folded it across and covered it up with her left hand. 'Yes,' she agreed, 'we must leave this young man out of our conversation. It's not, after all, as if we have anything in common.'

I tilted my chair backwards and raced upstairs to my room and printed JACKIE KYLE in long-last lipstick wide across my mirror.

And then sat, gazing steadily at myself. Longing for bigger breasts, broader lips . . . aw, just whatever it took to make him take one squinty-eyed look at me, press his teeth hard down on his lower lip and whistle.

Dan stood still outside the bedroom door, watching. 'Sorry, Sis, about your pal. Didn't meant that to happen. But he's bother, isn't he?'

'Well, if he is,' I roared as loud as I could, 'then he's my kind of bother.'

And I cried then. All over the place.

One Friday afternoon Jackie told me he was going to catch tadpoles in that lake on the other side of the cricket ground. 'Coming?'

I shook my head.

'Will I bring you some back then, in a jam jar?'

'My Mum hates frogs. Smell of slime, she thinks.'

'I thought you said there's a pond in your garden?'

'Waterlilies. She loves waterlilies.'

And he laughed.

'What about mice then? Do you like mice? I have a pet mouse, Genius – brains for the both of us she has – I'll bring her to school on Monday.'

She was in his lunch box. He had perforated the lid. We were sitting along the grassy edge of the playground when Mr Keane called across, 'Come on, Kyle. Got that book. Kept forgetting.'

Jackie leapt up, pushed the box into my hands and rushed over.

I don't know how it happened. Maybe my slippery, stupid gloves, or the suddenness of the move, or maybe I didn't catch it

properly. Don't know. Anyway, the box tilted, the lid edged off and Genius was gone. A flash of grey fur. A wisp of a tail.

The girls around me screamed and covered their eyes. Jackie turned back, saw and stood frozen.

And then I watched him race out of the school gate across the fields, and up over the hill above the school, one arm jammed into his bomber jacket, the other flapping loose like a crazed scarecrow.

After school I followed his tracks. Found him lying on the other side of the hill, full-length on the grass. Dodging the world.

Down below, just off the road, was a dilapidated caravan. Windows broken. And a plank to its door where there ought to be steps.

That was the moment I decided I'd go bird-watching, fishing, mushroom picking . . . all the things he had asked me to share with him, but I felt I daren't. Until then.

It meant lying to my parents about Saturdays for a very long time.

He taught me how the water vole snores, just like an old man; how to catch the musky smell of a fox at twenty yards; how to hear the restless whispers of the rainbow trout in the deep pools beneath the overhanging pussy willows; where to watch the hares, with their kangaroo-like legs, bounding into the air.

It seemed to me like no other world I'd ever known. And wherever it was, it was exactly where I wanted to be.

So, when he announced that he was going off as an Army cadet, a paratrooper, I felt sheer panic. 'Get away with you,' I teased, hoping it was some kind of trick, or something.

'Mr Keane is arranging it,' Jackie continued evenly. 'Says it's right for me. There's a sense of family, he says, in an Army unit. And I couldn't . . . didn't tell you, I was so certain they would reject me. And that's the truth.'

'But how would you kill? You'd never. Not you.'

'I could, if I thought of Wilson.' He spoke slowly, remembering. 'That man, convinced he had me sussed, he was. But I had thoughts and ideas, and he hadn't a clue about any of them. Nor never will.' Just for a second his eyes darkened.

And then he shrugged, 'Bet he's one of those "All birds are brown" merchants! Bloody moron!'

'Will you write to me?' I asked.

'You'd never be able to read it.'

'Will you think of me then?'

His brow gathered. 'Sometimes. Yeah!'

'What will you think?'

He pulled a piece of foxtail grass to suck, to consider. 'A girl with a pointy face. Eyes the colour of wet stones. And white gloves.'

'Only that?'

'But that's plenty to be going on with.' And he punched my arm.

That night, the night before he left, we took the back road, along the cornfield, to sit by our favourite stream. Multicoloured fireflies danced over the sloe-black water, like sparklers on Guy Fawkes Night.

'Some frogs eat so many of these that then they themselves glow,' he explained. 'Big blobs of light they become, hopping and croaking. Brill!'

The sky was the craziest orange I'd ever seen.

He dug deep into a pocket and brought out a matchbox. 'A no-special-reason present,' he joked. Inside was a moth with bronze-coloured eyes and marbled grey-green wings. Beautiful. 'A bat must have dropped it,' he said, handing it across.

'But you're not wearing your gloves,' he suddenly noticed.

'I just wanted to hold your hand.'

'You're great, you. Do you know that?' he said, and then he was silent.

Next day he left. And I felt I wasn't anywhere at all.

I left school at the end of the summer term. Got a live-in job as a receptionist in a small hotel in Gosforth, fifteen miles from home.

There were odd letters of a kind, in blue biro, with his name underlined at the end. I read each one several times, searching for underlying emotions. It wasn't easy. And somehow, on the day a letter arrived, I seemed to move more slowly. Achieve less.

And then he phoned. He was travelling from his base at Kinloss south to Thirsk. The train stopped for one minute at Newcastle.

Would it be worth my while to drive those six miles to the station and say hello. Just that.

I swapped shifts. Dug out the Seger tape I meant to send him for Christmas, 'The only kind of love is stone blind love'.

That April morning was new and cold. I shivered in my leggings and T-shirt.

'Looks good on you,' he says, expressionless. 'Easy to see where you are.' He shakes his head.

'You look . . .'

'More normal,' he interrupts. 'It's the uniform. No ankles or wrists permitted on parade. Nor vertical hair. They've discovered I'm dyslexic.'

Everything about him was different. And better, I suppose. Like somehow his pieces now slotted perfectly together.

'I'm applying . . .' The train started. 'I'm applying for a posting overseas. Would you come? Have you a passport?'

I ran along the platform to push the tape into his hands. Somehow his eyes seemed very round.

And then he called back something. Thought I may have heard . . . though probably not. Too far away to be certain.

A skinny girl in Doc Martens and a jerky plaid mini strode towards me.

'That geyser, head out the window, wanted to know if your Ma loves frogs yet. Got it?' Her lips curled.

On my way to the car I noticed that the flowers in the station window-boxes had frost on them.

I was on duty from noon until 10 p.m. Hectic, it was. Never off my feet. It was good not to think.

When I got home I dragged myself up those long, bleak stairs and into my room. I lay full-length on my bed and went out like a light, fully clothed.

That night, in my dreams I am an old lady sitting in a circle of stale air in a Rest Home. And I'm telling the inmates about him – his red hair, the way he leans, all he knows. Someone shouts, 'I wouldn't mind having his shoes under my bed of a night.' Then, her with the crêpy neck, she calls, 'Matron, can't you shut Annie up.' The Boss Lady appears, feet at right angles. 'Now Annie, we've heard all this before. He's from a long time ago. So, from

now on, his name is taboo in this Home.' And she writes in prim print in her little black book TALK TO DOC ABOUT A.

Next morning, from my bedroom window I watched a light wind toss the blossoms all around the back garden, like it was snowing flowers. I dressed quickly.

And then I spotted, written diagonally across the door, JACKIE KYL. The E was missing. Exhaustion probably, though maybe not.

I used to be able to write that name in a second.

Practice, I suppose.

Not any more.

CHUCK KRUGER

Belated Rite of Passage

Dedicated to George Underwood Jr, Arnie Mindell and Paddy O'Leary

Somewhere between the ages of three and five, Deghlan Delaney had had a dream that periodically flooded him with ricocheting bars of light, even now, at fifty-nine. When the dream surfaced, like a trench-bottom fish breaking water, he felt as though what had happened then was still happening now, or, as he sometimes fantasised, now was then . . . then now, time but a handy construct of the mind, the body, not, no no, of the spirit.

He assumed his myth implicit in his dream, but which myth – bloodsucking leeches of god-almighty analysts – he still wasn't sure. If Greek: Sisyphean labour, dammit and make the best of it, Camus style; if Mesopotamian: Gilgamesh breakthrough in search of life everlasting for his hairy friend. Please, dear gods, he mischievously prayed from what he had come to regard as his precarious perch on the bountiful tree of life, the latter; but if the former, let my downhill walks be rambles full not so much of decadence as of silly wholistic dalliance and middle-aged lyricism, if such beast be.

'Dreams don't give two hoots in hell about the freaking clock,' he'd tell his wife, arms flying about in absurd gesture; 'your earliest dream, like your earliest memory – if there's any difference – works prophetically, carries your seed, acorn to your oak.' For more than the pure fun and pain of it, but for these too, he had participated in dream workshops in the meandering foothills and ravines of the Green Mountains in New Hampshire, gestalt therapy sessions at the Easlin Institute above ocean-hugging Highway 1 in California, neo-Jungian process-oriented hands-on psychological training weeks in the flower-strewn Alps

of Graubunden and beside the agate-pebbled growling strands of Oregon.

Process-Oriented Psychology. POP. Pop goes the weasel. POP goes the pompous ass. Yes, old Pop-Pop, you who clicked your nails together to call me to morning porridge. So POP it is, he decided after a decade of your classical Jungian dream analysis, that's the ticket, the way, no, one way, my way, highway to the whole Self, ta-da, ta-dum! Roll of kettledrum. Sennet of trumpets. Counter-rhythmic thump of bodhran to bring him back down, to puncture his easy inflations. Snarling bagpipe in the ear. Bless all chthonic utterances. Humbaba.

The last seminar he attended was held alongside Lake Geneva, in the modest resort town of Le Bouveret, a mile from the Swiss-French border. The participants may have been freaky, but full of fun, alert, compassionately confrontational. They acted as if they were twenty years old yet had insights of old souls. Myndy, the leader, looked, in some lights, a shrunken Asian, weathered on the peaks of the Himalayas, schooled in the ashrams of Tibet. In other lights he appeared a thin, sinewy Israeli, anywhere between the ages of forty and sixty-five. Or an Eskimo trickster. Or Coyote. His prominent forehead shone. His wrinkles looked more the result of laughter than of suffering, but then again . . .

Deghlan was not surprised to discover that Myndy's first Ph.D. was from MIT, in physics; his second, from the University of Zürich, in psychology; his first professional diploma, from the Jung Institut, Küsnacht.

'Yikes,' he recalled, comfortably standing beside Deghlan, since it was precipitately Deghlan's session, 'the event of being labelled a certified psychoanalyst, that threw me. I started seeing patients, clients, analysands – guys like you, guys like these guys' – his gesture included all in the circle closing around them – 'and me, and for the first year I had to take a dump between each session, that's how sure I was inside myself. And then I started to see that the body says as much as dreams, and that when you work with both, well, wow! You get into process, you come up against edges, and edges are where you've the possibility for growth.' As he spoke, he danced like a boxer around Deghlan. They squared off.

Myndy feinted a few punches towards Deghlan's face, and then

caught him lightly in the solar plexus. The wind came out in a loud 'hunnnk'. Deghlan regained his balance, his breath, dropped to one knee and tackled Myndy. Once a high-school wrestler, Deghlan turned Myndy over onto his back. The imp in the analyst looked disarmingly up and said tauntingly, 'Come on, D.D., tell us the dream, tell us your first dream.'

They looked at each other, neither moving. Deghlan slowly lessened his controlling grip.

'Hey, hey,' said Myndy, still prone, looking up, 'we were boxing, and I had you, and you shifted to wrestling, and you had me, and I've now shifted into work mode – and now you, you nitwit, you've yourself.'

Myndy sat up, his arms behind him on the floor, and pulled himself backwards along the matting.

Deghlan looked around. Twelve pairs of eyes waited. The participants scuttled into a semicircle before Deghlan.

'I was in –'

'Tell it as though it's happening now,' quietly interrupted Myndy.

'Yeah, you nincompoop,' said Trinkie, 'you sissified psycho-pomp.' Laugher. Her session the previous afternoon had initially revolved around her tendency to let even a bureaucratic letter rile her up. The session had ended with her recognition that evil, insidious creature, occurs whenever one human being, let alone an organisation, treats another as an object. She who didn't like being labelled, being treated by labels, had just consciously labelled him. Her tears remembered, he let go.

He first scowled lightly at the group as if to acknowledge no more than that his ears worked. And then he eyed the group, slowly catching each person. He took a deep breath, set forth:

'I'm in a tunnel, long, long and dark. I feel rather than see a pair of wild hares nipping at my heels, herding me, driving me on. The hares were my lovely, cuddly (okay, guys, everyone's entitled to some romantic diction) furry slippers, but they've metamorphosed into living, hungry, snarling creatures, and turned on me. I'm running, sometimes scurrying, to keep from being devoured in itsy bitsy (there I go again) sinister mouth-fuls.'

'He's doubly conscious, you guys,' whispered the leader, perhaps teasing yet alerting Deghlan; 'he's able to be in both worlds at once. Watch his body now, not just his words. Watch for what he repeats in gesture, in diction.'

Deghlan now sat cross-legged, Indian fashion, his hands inscribing circles.

'The sides of the tunnel were – oops, I'm interrupting myself, I'm falling out of tense – are, yes are, the sides of the tunnel are damp, cold, constructed long ago of huge stone hunks, granite ashlars. Whenever I stop for breath, the hares soon catch up and start their horrible nipping, a molestation that has, if not death (boom boom!), lingering suffering its goal. (No, it's not melodrama, Trinkie.) Mother hare. And father hare. (*Reductio ad ovum*, guys.) I want to scream and scream, scream so that my insides pour out, molten, rage as never man raged, but I also want to escape the tunnel – and I sense that if I give in to the "primal" impulse, I'll never succeed in accomplishing the paramount, for at the end of the tunnel gleams a small circle of golden light, a distinct but vastly distant pinprick of possibility. Sunrise promise. While it doesn't appear to grow larger the longer I run, not to run would be to surrender to the tyranny of the unjust marauding petty, the archetypal cop-out (get that, pals from California).'

'On with it. Don't be so self-conscious, D.D.'

Deghlan stood up. He slowly ran in place. Straight lines replaced circles.

'Without sleeping I'm forced to run the entire day, the night, the second day/night, the third day/night, day/night, no diff. I'm aware of my hands pumping at my sides: sometimes they're open, slicing into the black air, and other times they're clenched, fists, and batter my way forward, scared stride by scared stride. On the fourth day I begin to discern a dim light along the length of the tunnel. I don't notice when it begins to appear, I've become so mechanical, a mechanism, life reduced to a monotonous strained motion; yet the continuous running is the only way to survive. I'm the still surviving perfunctory. On the fifth day/night, when I look over my shoulder, I actually see the hounding hares. Their back legs powerful, the hind legs on kangaroos; their oversized,

protruding front teeth shine a clean white in the growing light. On the sixth day I feel the air freshening, I notice that the bumps on the rough stones begin to cast slight shadows. On and on. And on the seventh day the light becomes brighter, with each slow stride brighter. Soon it's almost blinding. I don't mind: I can eat the air, drink the fresh wind. I feast as I flee. I feel energy filling me, flowing through me, through my tired limbs, through my tired old ticker.'

He enacted a stumble, caught himself. His face became haggard, an El Greco cruci-fiction. He tried to look around the circle of faces. Smiled limply.

'I know, at last, that I can, will, make it. I suddenly realise that the hares have turned back some time ago; I haven't had to shake the buggers off for hours. I slow down. I'm gasping, permitting myself the liberty to gasp. I suck in delicious lungful after lungful. I walk. I walk and walk. I walk out into light. Out, safe, solitary. I don't know where I am, but I'm infinitely relieved to be here. I lay me down, down on hummocky, warm, multifoliate grass. And sleep.'

He fell to the floor. The group cheered. They came up to him. They swirled about in a huge embrace, falling on him. A mound of bodies.

That was his dream, how he told it under the Matterhorn during that 'first-dream seminar' one wet July. He hated the tunnel, but it was, he knew, his adventure and he accepted it, welcomed it, wanting it to burst into open air. In its own time.

And this was his memory, albeit an accumulated one, one that grew over the years but which began when he was four and ended when he was twelve, the June of 1950 when both his maternal grandparents died within a week of each other, their house sold within a month, and his grandfather's labyrinthine collections of stamps and maps and valentines auctioned off for peanuts within three months of his funeral. Deghlan wrote the memory in his journal that same seminar, which then, like the other participants' journals, was circulated through the group one afternoon and evening. He wrote:

'In the summers, when able to visit my grandparents, I loved

nothing more than to walk down the long cool upstairs hallway, past the door to Gramma's bedroom suite, past the door to my grandfather's little nook, past the guest room, which once had been my mother's bedroom, past the door to the main upstairs bathroom, and then, instead of continuing down the hallway to the top of the back stairs, and all the linen closets, and the maid's room, I'd turn left, into Grampy's study, and there, cross the room slowly and finally sit in the armed wooden swivel chair before the huge desk – and gaze about as though to each object I'd devote years of scrutiny and adoration and pride. I felt, there, and there only, like a little king.

'I always imagined Grampy with me, a little old bald-headed man with thick glasses. He was filled with folklore. I could ask him for advice at any moment; the king could ask his adviser for help with a nod of the head.

'The king would pull open this drawer, that, and see what all his subjects were up to: the jar-counties full of Indian-head pennies ready to cater to his every need, the stamp-hinge envelope-lands waiting to rush off as his private emissaries, the plasticine territories neatly arranged and filled with delicate perforations, waiting to wait on him. All, all were at his beck and command, at his every swivel.

'The room itself had a cavernous sense. A copy of the Magna Carta hung beside the door, middle-nineteenth-century valentines under glass surrounded the doorway to the spacious walk-in storage closet, maps the size of tapestries depended from s-shaped, three-quarter-inch-wide brass hooks secured by the top curve of the picture moulding.

'The maps and charts I loved best of all. Those on the walls looked varnished, and the varnish had begun to crack. Grampy spoke of patinas. The thick, wooden-knobbed dowelling at the top or northern ends and at the southern bottoms made the maps look as though they were giant scrolls. Some of the maps were of the town where Grampy still lived, where my mom had been born, and had pictures of various houses and public buildings drawn down the sides and along the bottoms: the Seward Mansion, the State Prison, the Osborne House.

'One map, a much smaller one, stayed spread out on the desk,

under a piece of thick glass. Tiffany triangles of filigreed brass protected each corner. On this map I could lean and gaze for hours. At the bottom left it read, "Surveyed in 1842." And at the very bottom, to the right of the legend, I loved to read: "Published by the Director General at the Ordnance Survey Office, Phoenix Park, Dublin, 1847."

'It was a map of Clear Island, County Cork, Ireland. Grampy explained to me about perches and chains and furlongs, about baronies and parishes and townlands, about contours and trigonometrical stations, about statute miles and spring tides and rights of way. But my grandfather, my visor, couldn't explain to me the exact nature of the marked antiquities. These sites held a special fascination for me, mainly because, at first, they appeared in a mysterious script I'd never before seen.

'Grampy taught me how to use the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the 1911 edition, in order to find things out. "School," he said, "is where you should learn to learn. That learned, the world's your oyster, boy." Under *font*, we discovered that the antiquities on the Ordnance Survey map were designated in Cloister Black. But I still didn't know what they were. Finally Grampy ordered an Irish–English dictionary: a *Gallaun* turned out to be a standing stone, and I decided I would not, after all, become a cartographer but an archaeologist.

'End memory.'

End week-long workshop.

And the mighty little king, the budding archaeologist? Deghlan became a high-school science teacher, and when his own children were grown and had left home, he and his wife finally had enough money to take vacations abroad. Sometimes they attended such seminars. But they also began to visit Ireland annually. Particularly Cape Clear Island, where they bought a cottage.

Cape had a quality he couldn't name, and he valued the island that much more for that. 'True places', he remembered from Herman Melville, 'are never on the map.' And Cape, he felt, was full of 'true places'. The mystery he'd felt as a boy in the heavy Cloister Black script he experienced as a middle-aged man walking Cape. It wasn't just its isolation, the raggedness of the

terrain, the thoughtful little kindnesses of the people, the magic of its shifting light, the immediacy of all weathers; it felt well lived-in, like a comfy old slipper, but one that wouldn't wear out. At the same moment that he sensed people had been walking this hill, exploring that cave, for thousands of years, he also felt that no one, ever, had been here before now, on this rock, climbing this cliff. It was as though the universe was dramatising its age yet communicating itself as new-born.

One day, in early June of his fifty-ninth summer, already on Cape for his vacation, he had what seemed more than a waking dream. He heard the telephone ring, ring with strident urgency. He picked up the handset. The cradle shook. 'Fitzgerald Park on the line. You are to come to our museum today. Without fail. It's time.'

He knew it didn't happen, wasn't happening, not outside him. But it was happening nevertheless. He couldn't for the life of him refuse.

He left Cape on the nine-o'clock ferry, journeyed to Baltimore on a flat sea, found his car, covered in dried salt, drove non-stop the hour and a half to Cork, exactly fifty-nine miles on the odometer.

He had often seen the facsimile of the Cape Clear Stone in the island's Heritage Centre and, since he had also read book after book on the ancient Celts, Mother Goddesses, Druidism, Stonehenge, Newgrange, Pre-Christian Ireland, he knew that the time had more than came to see – to experience – the original stone. While he didn't like to leave the island, each day there precious, gale force wind or pea soup fog, he rationalised that he was going towards the island while leaving it. And he had no choice. Like the magical life-force of a giant in a fairy-tale, Cape's secret heart beat on the second floor of a palace as good as on the other side of the world.

He spent the afternoon in Fitzgerald Park – all of it on the second floor of the museum.

The stone took him by surprise. It was nothing like the facsimile, which now was pure counterfeit, without texture, without dimensionality. Oh, he swung about with the fierce

cosmological patterns – three swirling spirals, tra la, let the world be full of light, oh, and the fecundating circumscribing zigzags, bwa-zam, ka-boom. Straight on, Deghlan, straight on, world.

If Freud stood behind Leopold Bloom as he sat beside the Liffey watching a sweet young thing, Jung, Deghlan imagined, stood behind him as he fantasised on the beginnings of this stone. Where, he wondered, did the stone originate? A stone of such artistic power – and wasn't all art, Dada or La Tène or child's scribble, essentially religious in nature? – a stone of such soul-swirling had never been erected as mere decoration. A 'decorated stone' my foot, he thought: five millennia back someone, someones, had a cause, had a conviction. Imagine having been an astronomer five thousand years ago. Imagine gathering the information necessary for an alignment. Hey, boy, hey, he thought, that's pre-pyramids!

Grampy, where are you? I need you.

On the way back to Baltimore he noticed he was all but in a meditation, a rambunctious meditation. And he had spoken that question, that declaration. In his mind or aloud, he couldn't tell. Like the phone ringing that morning.

And Grampy came. He held a cane in his hand, tap tap, and came hobbling down a quartz crystal lane towards where Deghlan stood. He said: 'You're out in the big world now, Deghlan. Measure up: it's your chance.'

'Huh?' was all he could utter. Then: 'Grampy, I love you. How are you?'

'We know all that, Deghlan. I'm here because of what we don't know.'

'It's been thirty years.'

'A year's but a wave upon the far shore.'

'You always told me not to take love for granted.'

'Deedles, that I'm here is love. Look for the sun, my son of my sun, my son of my daughter.'

Deghlan swept his arms around his grandfather in an embrace of decades. His arms passed through the insubstantial old man, who winked mischievously, turned, hobbled off, tap-tapping down the dazzling crystal path.

He pulled off the road. Tears streaming. He felt joyous; didn't know what had happened, but that it had happened at all was – was a fullness of being. He mumbled, 'My cup runneth over in the presence.'

Absorbing emotion, storing it up, treasure, he breathed loudly, deeply. Dilapidated cars, puffing tractors passed. Belching bus. Teetery trailer full of hay heading for barn, racing before clouds of black. The smell of pollen eased him back. He drove the bends into Skibbereen, around the narrow twists and turns to Baltimore. He parked across from the garda station out of habit, and walked as if in a daze to the waiting mailboat, its propellers already sending out swirls into the harbour.

His grandfather. Measure up. Big chance. The sun.

Yes, the sun. He would take careful measurements; would haunt the tomb winter solstice sunset, summer solstice sunrise, would eat and drink at the tomb, eat and drink the tomb. If the tomb had an orientation, the stone had a home.

With a mission, he felt free. Had no need to make choices. All was given. You don't have to study archaeology to love a stone. Study kills beloveds. Hawthorne's young doctor cutting out the birthmark of his Desdemona wife, foul birthmark rooted deep, in purity of soul. Study does away with wisdom. What's wisdom anyway but small kindnesses done.

Crossing Roaringwater Bay to the island, he went further than he'd ever gone. He let himself go, travelled with the speed of light. He entered the world of stone, imagined himself stone. Sailing out to Cape, he became stone, the stone.

Stone-crossed mind. Stone-swirling mind. I'm on my back in 1874, lying where the marauders left me three thousand years ago when they savaged my mom. They dragged me away, a slave, and then discarded me in that long narrow field. Tom Shipsey's island townland, Croha West, oh you Dónal O Síocháin, you Pádraig O Ríogáin, you cleared the field, you found me, you cared for my beauty. You carried me to that sonless priest and he planted me in his kitchen garden and I bloomed. He left. I withered.

I've been abducted, evicted, abandoned, centuries, millennia of neglect. Give me back Cnoc Caraintín. Give me back my mother,

all our mothers. You poor people, believing in one god, masculine. It takes two, male and female you should recognise as they them. Nothing's wrong with you except imbalance. Imbalance leads you to deny creation joy. When you then become arrogant, repressive, negative, so too does your god. Monotheism sucks. Masculinity unlimited. Marry off your Jehovah, your Allah; and as you regain your balance, so too your world.

How dare they designate me a symbol of social cohesion, an expression of territorial behaviour in small-scale sedentary societies? I'm simply a place for light, loving light, to rest, to reveal the mere structure of the world, the order, that which gives cohesion to flocks of floating souls. That which affirms the cycle of birth and death and rebirth and redeath.

I was a centre, a meeting place, a loved one now and then in light.

I was the clitoris, the touch of masculine in the feminine place. I watched my father the sun enter my mother the earth's straight and narrow chamber.

Sperm light, sperm bright,
thou guidest my soul
through all the dark nights.

Whoa, boy. Deghlan disembarked. He didn't extend his greeting to those around him on the pier. He couldn't: he didn't see them. Yet he walked as deliberately as a man can walk. Each stride became part of a sacred journey. Towards light.

When he reached the foot of the highest hill, he didn't hesitate, didn't falter. He climbed over the initial stile. The tractor-rutted, twisting road to the windmills might have been as flat as the pavement before the Taj Mahal. He couldn't stop. Were they the furies behind him? No matter.

Roaringwater Bay filled with gentle red. The sun sank into the sea, and when it had disappeared, a residue of clarity bathed the mountains of West Cork as though they had just been created. But Deghlan wasn't one for sunsets just then but one for stones.

As he examined yet again the prehistoric tomb, the sub-circular

spread of stone, he concentrated on its centre. There lay a modest, three-sided chamber. He sat, leaned back against the side facing north by north-east. Before him, not ten feet away, was a small row of five stones pointing in the same direction. They'd always been there and he'd never seen them before. Now if, he thought, if the orientation was on the summer solstice sunrise, then we could be certain that this site is indeed a passage tomb. Passage tombs have decorated stones. I'll sleep here every night around the summer solstice until I see what I see.

He lay back. And he slept through the night. And woke, dew-drenched, stiff, hungry for the sun. The sky to the east was brightening.

He was atop his favourite hill in the world. He checked his watch: a little after 04:00 on 06 20 93. A dawning before him. He stretched, stood, stretched again, sat, wriggled his back against the back of the chamber. He pulled out the compass he had started carrying with him and once more read the orientation: 40 degrees east of north. The stones stretched out before him. Chamber sides? Marker stones? The horizon glowed, became glowing gold. A line of poetry came to him, a point of reference, 'Gold to airy thinness beate'. Before him he felt the horizon of the world. Throbbing. He was ready. He was, he felt, at the end of a long tunnel.

And like celestial clockwork, at last, there it was, in a cloudless golden dawn: on the horizon five miles NNW of Rosscarbery, in the gap formed by Carrigfadda – the highest hill the east had to offer – and Carrigagrenane; there, in the valley between the two hills, in line with the passage and shining into the chamber, rose the solstice sun, manifesting himself in the lowest point of the gap. Twenty-two miles from Cnoc Caraintín, the gap perfectly framed the emergent disc.

Deghlan could hear faint cheers from Fitzgerald Park.

Home of stone, stone home.

He felt as if he had been plucked up by the ankles, held aloft in the trembling air, and spanked with beauty.

The media briefly took over, had their field day, left. The sadly pilfered but panoramic site would enter the archaeological tomes, as would Deghlan, who began to wonder if he hadn't become

responsible for all future pilfering. Would his discovery of what he loved, he wondered, contribute to its timeless destruction?

He went on. The site acquired implications, national, international. National, because the tomb became the first authenticated passage tomb in County Cork, the third in all of Ireland with summer solstice alignment. International, because the discovery buttressed the growing belief that all such tombs have astronomical orientations. Had he helped, had he been helped, he mused, to help the world regain a millimetre of balance?

Are picturesque site, modest tomb, early occupant earlier or contemporary with 'earliest' Newgrange? Hang on, pal. Could Mr Stone's passage tomb be the earliest astronomical site in the world? But that way lies inflation. The other, pedantry. Careful.

The night he had that thought, he had a dream: His grandfather, holding a cane in one hand, tap tap, came hobbling down a quartz crystal lane towards where Deghlan stood. A rising sun shone bars of light along the lane, striking Deghlan. They shone straight through the body of his grandfather, warmed Deghlan's chest. His grandfather came up to him, raised his free hand to Deghlan's brow, said simply: 'Son of my sun, you could do worse in this world than spend your little time and energy, as the ancients did, to orient yourself properly. Passage tombs are but metaphors reminding us of heavenly homes, eternal directions.' He flung his cane to the four winds, wrapped his strong arms around Deghlan's chest. They embraced. His grandfather had youthful muscles, stone hard. Chest to chest they stood, his grandfather as warm as a stone that has soaked up the sun's rays through millennia. And then the sun set. And Deghlan was in a large house, his own, with a deep, cavernous cellar, filled with barrel-vaulted chambers he'd never before seen.

He awoke. He felt ready to chart new regions. At breakfast he said to his wife, 'Anyone for cartography of the soul?' She looked at him. He looked at her. She waited. He waited. And then, out poured miles, days, years of laughter, laughter that spread around them, laughter in which they could take their ease, laughter that was like welcoming, warm, hummocky, multifoliate grass in

which they rolled apart, together. The world, to them both, felt new, they new to the world.

Looking back once again, Deghlan winced, caught himself thinking, 'Somethin' to be said for tunnel vision.'

ARNOLD FANNING

Still Rain

Jess woke to it, dark still, the early morning not yet graced by light, dulled more by the torrent outside. He reached and pulled the string to the light above his bed, then turned to the clock beside him. 'Aw shite it,' he said aloud and got up quickly, went to his big brother in the bed opposite his and shook him. For a moment Malachi did not respond. Then finally there was movement, a groaning, like he was prising himself from the sleep that held him tight. His pale hands clutched the blanket tighter to his face a moment as he looked at his little brother standing over him. In the weak light from over the bed, Jess gestured in clear sign language: 'I woke late. The alarm did not go. It's seven o'clock.'

Malachi's eyes tried to shut, then open, and his eyes lost focus. He looked across at the clock and nodded slightly. Then he threw aside the covers and stood up. Jess flinched, but Malachi only pushed his brother aside and went over to the wardrobe to pick out his clothes. Jess cursed again and went downstairs.

He came into the kitchen, his bare feet slapping against the cold stone slabs of the floor, and pulled across the curtains. Outside it was black, like night still, the yard and stables and outhouses of the farm nothing against the rain and darkness. It seemed impossible a sun could ever enter that hard sky and make it day. He got the range going and put on the kettle, then put the black pot of porridge on the heat. He tried to warm his hands from the fire, but no heat was coming out. He sat and waited for the kettle to boil, his hands under his armpits, facing the window and the featureless beyond.

Malachi came in dressed in a cotton shirt, wool trousers and the leather hunting vest he had won shooting at the fair three years before. He went to the back door and opened it. A cold breeze blew in. He stared out at the yard and watched the rain falling against

the cobbles of the farmyard. Slowly he closed the door. Water had fallen against his feet and the toes of his socks were damp. From inside the scullery door he got his boots and threw them over on the floor of the kitchen. He reached into the back and took out the gun, a twin-barrelled shotgun, found some oilcloth and began to polish it. Then he wrapped the cloth around the breech and laid the gun across the table. He sat putting his boots on there as he waited for his breakfast.

Jess stood up and started to make a pack of food for Malachi to take out. He was cutting the bread when somewhere in the house a door creaked. He looked towards the stairwell and called: 'Ma? Is that you?' But there was no further sound. He made the sandwiches, then served up the breakfast.

Malachi ate without a pause between mouthfuls. When he was done, he put on his waxed coat and slung a bag around his shoulder, then put a wide-brimmed hat on his head. He went to the door and stood looking out. Then he broke the gun, loaded it and hung it over his arm, the oilcloth covering his breech.

Jess came up and pulled Malachi's arm to get his attention, then signed again: 'Your lunch,' holding out the wrapped sandwiches and a jar of milk. Malachi shoved the packet and the jar into the pockets of his coat and stepped out into the rain. A sense of light was there at the edge of the clouds, a greyness in the black hinting at the break of day. Malachi considered the rain again, falling no lighter, then walked off through the yard towards the fields. Before he reached the gate he was near invisible in the mists.

Jess dressed and lay upstairs a while. Then he got a tray of breakfast ready and brought it up to his mother. She was lying back in bed, her mouth slightly open, her eyes reflecting a little of that first light that was now making its way through the curtains. Jess couldn't tell if she was awake or asleep. He laid the tray on the bed and sat on the chair beside her.

She was thin and her skin hung loose and empty from her limbs. Her head was almost bald, the scalp red and darker than the colourless skin of her neck and face. Black marks stained the backs of her hands, and her cheeks and the thin arms that were stretched outside the blankets. Her breathing was rough, and wet,

and rattled. Finally she moved, opened her eyes, looked over at Jess.

'I brought your breakfast, Ma,' he said. Her head lolled as she looked over to the tray. She made a sucking noise against her teeth and looked at him again.

'I was just about to call you,' she said. He stood and got her upright, pumping the pillows behind her, then put the tray on her lap. She began to eat noisily, her hands swaying slightly with the weight of the cup, the spoon, the bread.

'Were you up?' asked Jess.

'What are you saying?'

'I thought I heard you up.'

She frowned. 'I never get up,' she said. 'I never get up so I don't.'

Jess smiled. He waited for her to eat some more. Then he went on: 'Ah you do, Ma. You get yourself up now and then. I know you do. Sure don't I hear ya.'

His mother stared straight ahead, the cup and bread trembling in her hands. She thought a moment. 'I never do,' she finally exclaimed, looking at him, 'and that's a fact. I wait for you and Malachi so I do before I get up. To help me.'

Jess was silent. After a moment he said, 'He's away out already. In the rain.'

'Aye. That lad'll never be put off by bad weather.'

'It might clear yet.'

'Was he wearing the old boots.'

'Aye. I think so.'

'Then it's down for the day. That lad knows everything about how a day will turn out.'

'Aye, he does.'

'Might catch us a nice dinner, heh? A nice hare, how about that?' She smiled at him and he nodded.

'Aye. That he'll do, no doubt about it, weather and all.' She put down the cup and closed her eyes half-way. Jess stood and quietly took the tray off her. Her eyes opened and fixed on him. 'That was lovely, pet,' she said. He nodded, and crossed the room. Before he went out he turned to her. She was lying back with her eyes closed again and breathing heavily.

'Ma?' said Jess. 'Ma?' he said again when she didn't speak.

Without opening her eyes she finally answered, 'What is it, pet?'

'Are you feeling any better today, Ma?'

'No,' she said quietly. 'No better today.'

'Do you feel like getting up at all today?'

'No, not today. A few more days yet, love.' Then she seemed to sink into herself, and into the pillow, and fall asleep.

Later that morning he sat in the kitchen, a cup of tea going cold in his hand an hour, listening to the rain fall on a day that seemed hardly ever to have broken. The noise outside was like ice shattering the whole time as the water hit the cobbles. He saw someone cross the yard and got up to open the door. McPherson, old and shrinking in his clothes, stood outside, at his heel his worried dog Meely, looking sad in the rain.

'I won't come in and wet your slate,' said McPherson with a smile. Jess sat down again and sipped the tea. McPherson went on, 'I'm just here to see if Malachi wants to step along with me despite the weather that's in it.' He had his gun across his arm, the oilcloth over the broken breech keeping the cartridges dry, and was rubbing the grey stubble of his chin as he watched the boy. The drain made an irregular splutter, and Meely jumped and looked over at the sound.

Jess jerked his head. 'He's away gone out these past two hours a'ready,' he said. 'You'll have to stir yerself early if you want his company for shooting.'

McPherson looked off towards the gate to the fields beyond, mere murk in the rain. Then he turned back to Jess. 'Would ye be coming yerself?' he asked.

Jess looked down at the cup in his hand. 'Sure how can I? Don't I have to be stopping here to mind the Ma?'

The old man shifted the shotgun on his arm slightly. It looked enormous in his spindly hands. He lowered his voice. 'Is she any better, our Paula?' he asked.

'What's that?' said Jess loudly.

The old man shifted forward slightly, still keeping his voice down. A little spout of water fell from the creases of his hat and hit the floor. 'Your Ma,' he said, and the dry slate of the kitchen

gathered a wet black stain across itself. 'Is she any better?' The rain sounded louder than ever against the man's whisper.

Jess stared at the bottom of his cup. 'Can you read this?' he said then, holding out the cup. The old man looked at it. Jess lifted it up and tried to tilt it so the old man could see the leaves sitting in the last of the dregs in the bottom. 'Can you read it at all?' he asked again.

McPherson shook his head, keeping his eyes on Jess. 'Nay, that I can't,' he said. 'I never took any mind of that.'

Jess put the cup back on the table and watched the dregs swirl and shift the leaves once more. 'Aye, there's something there all the same,' he said, 'if you only knew how it was done.'

'No change, then?' asked McPherson. Outside his wet dog sat down heavily and stared at the back of his owner's head.

'No. No change. Every day the same. Every day saying she'll get up now in a few days. Then saying the same thing again when that day comes around. Like she has no sense left of time passing.'

'What's it been now, a year? A year or more I'd say.'

'Aye,' said Jess. He was staring out at the dog, who'd caught his eye and had his ears pinned back, the water matting the hair on his head to a lick. 'Must be a fourteen month, near enough. Fourteen month in that bed, and never a sign of wanting to get out of it.'

The old man shifted the weight on his arm and twitched his shoulder. The dog stood up.

'Aye, it's a strange one, all right,' said McPherson, and shook his head. He turned off without another word, his dog at his heels casting longing glances back at the warm kitchen, then went out the yard to the meadow beyond. Jess got up slowly and closed the door, then went to the sink and washed out his cup.

It was almost noon when his mother had the first coughing attack. Jess was standing at the door watching the yard for Malachi's return when he heard her, and he leaned in to listen better before running up the stairs to her room. She was leaning out over the basin which she had managed to pull from under the bed. Already its white enamel was spattered irregularly with the lumpy brown fluid that she was spitting from her mouth. She swayed slightly and fell back on the pillow. Jess could hear from

her trapped breathing that she was choking on more of the stuff as it rose in her throat.

'Ma,' said Jess coming forward. 'Ma, come on, Ma.' He lifted her by the shoulders, held her over the basin again. Her body seemed to quiver as she tried to retch, but she hadn't the strength left to get it all out. Jess kneaded her between the shoulder-blades, feeling the sharpness of her bones against his palms, the trembling that went through her. Her back felt like the ribs of a greyhound after a run.

With a sudden cough she stopped shaking and spewed a lump of the stuff into the basin. Then she breathed again. Jess placed her back on the pillow and wiped her mouth with a towel from the bureau. She lay there gasping, her eyes wide open and bloodshot, her lips pale and moving slightly like she was talking inaudibly to herself. Jess took her hand.

'Who is it?' she asked, her eyes not turning to him.

'It's me, Ma. It's Jess.

She squeezed his hand when she heard the voice, pinching the flesh. 'Ah, Jess, you're a good boy,' she said. She was trying to sleep, to close her eyes, but the lids seemed unable to shut fully, so was staring absently at the ceiling.

After a while she spoke. 'Is it still rain?' she asked.

'Aye, it is.'

'Aye. Still rain.' She panted, and breathed more calmly. 'And is Malachi away out in it yet?'

'Aye. Away out he is.'

'He should know better than to leave you here so long alone.'

'I don't mind, Ma.'

'He should come back and let you have some time to yourself.'

'I don't mind it, Ma, really.'

Her eyes finally shut and she sank back into the pillow, exhausted. Her breathing, still wet and with a faint rattle, slowed down to just a sigh, and the hand that held Jess's dropped to the bed and curled up against her body. Jess got up slowly. He had the basin in his hand and was at the door when she spoke again.

'I was thinking about your father,' she said. 'Why did he do that to Malachi?'

'What, Ma?' Jess asked.

'With the gun,' she said faintly. Jess was not sure whether she was awake or talking in her sleep. He took a step towards her.

'Why did he do that?' she said.

'It was nothing he done, Ma,' said Jess. 'It was just an accident.'

'Accident,' she said, 'how was it an accident? Who ever heard of a young fella going deaf from hearing a gunshot go off, heh?'

'It must have been Malachi, Ma, standing too close. The doctor always says so, that Malachi probably had weak hearing or the like his whole life before.' Jess was standing over the bed. 'It was nothing Da done to him, Ma.'

'All I know is this,' she said. 'There was nothing wrong with that lad, hearing or otherwise, when he went off that morning shooting with your father, and him in one of his black moods as usual. Then they brought me my own boy back and I couldn't talk to him again.' Then she seemed to be asleep.

Jess stood by, waiting for her to say some more, but she didn't. He finally whispered: 'It was just an accident, Ma. Everyone says so. It was nothing he done.' Then he went to wash out the basin.

He was standing outside, in his wax coat against the rain still falling, swirling water around in the basin and chucking it out across the cobbles, when Malachi finally walked back in through the gate and crossed the yard. He had the gun broken over his arm and the game bag at his side was heavy with dead hares. He had another in his free hand, held by the ears in his fist, a clot of blood stuck running in a line across its protruding teeth. Jess put the basin down and walked after his brother who was going into the old stable. When they got to the door Malachi turned abruptly and thrust the hare at Jess's head. A spout of blood flicked across his face.

'Ah would ye fuck out of it, ye git,' shouted Jess. Malachi laughed and went into the stable. Jess spat to clean his mouth of the blood, then followed in.

Malachi had leant the gun against the wall, and was now taking off the bag, his coat, his vest. Then he took his knife down from a shelf and began to skin the hares. He hacked off the feet, then slit out the guts, throwing the mess out the door past Jess onto the cobbles. Then he cut the skin around the neck and began to pull it off all in one piece. What was left, the tiny pink flesh, he

put it into the big enamel sink in the corner and washed it under the tap. Jess stood watching. After a while there were three of the tiny things, like foetuses, in the sink. Outside, the basin in the yard filled with rain. Jess looked at it, then back to Malachi, then went up to him and pulled him by the arm. The hare in his hand, half skinned, fell to the floor and the dust stuck. Jess signed to his brother: 'You bring that basin up to Ma. And sit with her until I get back.' His brother just stared down at the body at their feet. Then Jess turned and walked out of the stable, across the yard and out the gate to the meadow, without a glance back.

Jess walked as fast as he could through the torrent, breathing the fresh air, letting the rain wash him. He went down the meadow and through the forest, and walked a while by the river, finally sitting down by a sheltered pool under a clutch of hawthorns. The big drops of rainwater that fell through the leaves above splashed on the surface of the river, their rings mingling with those of the tiny squalls made by the trout below as their mouths broke the surface after flies. Jess sat on a rock and ran his hand through the brown water a while, looking out at the black day beyond the copse. A noise made him look up and he saw Meely, McPherson's dog, come scratching and sniffing off the bank to the water's edge.

Jess stood up and walked towards him. 'Here, Meely. Here, boy,' he called, stretching his hand out to the dog. But it only twitched and jerked its head back and forth, as if listening for something beyond what was near at hand, and took no notice of Jess. Then there was the sudden boom of a shotgun nearby, and the dog went into a frenzy of excitement and bolted off up the river, its tongue aslaver out its chops. Jess stood up on the bank and looked around, but couldn't make out a thing except the black wet tree-trunks and the grey wall of rain. There wasn't a sound but the leaking rainwater and the plop of the feeding trout.

'Ah, fuck it to hell,' said Jess aloud, and walked back home.

The first thing he saw when he walked into the yard was the enamel basin, sitting in the centre where he'd left it. The kitchen door was still open, swinging in the breeze. The basin had a puddle of water in it. Just beyond the stable door the cat was eating the hares' guts that were staining the cobbles as the rain

ran through them and spread their muck across the yard. Jess went for the stable.

Malachi was there, sitting in his shirt, a little blood across the belly of it. From a hook above his head hung the hares, pale and thin like elm branches. In his hand he had one of the feet which he was stitching up roughly. He glanced up at the boy, then went back to the stitching. Jess saw all he needed. His face paled and his lips began to shake. He ran out across the yard and into the house, and went up the stairs at a sprint. Slowly he entered his mother's room.

She was lying back on the pillows like before, her chin covered in the black fluid she had been coughing. It went in a thick line down her neck and made a swathe across the white linen sheet. Her mouth was wide open like she was gasping for air, only it was full to the brim with the black bile. Jess went to her and touched her shoulder. Her head rolled slightly to one side and the liquid dribbled out the corner of her mouth. A sour smell came off her, causing him to step back. Her eyes seemed half open, like when she had been trying to sleep, so he reached out and touched her cheek. Then he turned and ran back out to the yard.

Malachi was sitting in the stable still, his hands in his lap. He seemed to be expecting Jess's arrival and watched his approach indifferently. The boy stood before him and tried to sign, then he just started to scream.

'You're a fucking fool,' he cried. 'Do you understand what I'm saying to you?'

His brother sat, still.

'You're a fucking fool,' shouted Jess again. 'Could ye not do the one thing I asked ye to?' Then he punched Malachi on the shoulder. 'Could ye not do the one thing,' he screamed and struck again. Malachi hardly moved from the blows, just sat and stared at his brother. 'You're a fucking dummy, ye know that, don't ye? You're a fucking dummy.' Then he struck his brother across the face.

Malachi stood up and reached for the gun. It was leaning against the wall where he had left it and he took it in his right hand as he stood. With his left he caught Jess by the throat and lifted him off the ground. Jess tried to shout, but couldn't breathe.

Malachi put the muzzle of the gun by Jess's ear and fired. A line of blood spat out of it as the eardrum burst. Then Malachi fired at the other side. This time Jess passed out with the boom and Malachi let him drop to the ground.

When he came to, McPherson was standing over him. The old man was looking straight into the boy's face and his lips were moving, but Jess couldn't hear a thing. All he could hear was the sound of harsh muffled bells ringing. McPherson shook his head and stood back, and Jess saw they were in the kitchen. There were other people moving about the place and an old woman Jess barely recognised put a cup of tea in his hand. Jess looked out into the hallway and there were more there, the doctor, standing at the lowest step, talking to some people coming down the stairs. Jess could only see lips moving, see the feet touching the bare wood. There wasn't a sound to be heard over the bells ringing in his head. Then he saw Malachi.

He was sitting in the corner by the range, the gun across his lap. One hand rested on the breech, shut, the other held the hare's foot he had stitched up. He kneaded and stroked the brown fur between finger and thumb, and his other hand stroked the black metal of the gun barrel. When he noticed Jess staring at him he jerked his head as if in question. McPherson, standing by the door, stroking the head of his dog that was crouching in the corner, looked up at this to see Jess's reaction. But the boy just sat there, drinking his tea to the dregs, staring at Malachi and at his father's gun, laid flat across his brother's lap.

JOSEPH O'NEILL

Elements

A man – a man called Meaney – once told me about an episode of his life which was so grooved and perfected in his mind that, speaking, he sounded like a man reading from a script. The curious thing about the faultlessness of the narration was that the story had never been told before. In fact, it had hitherto been a secret – a secret unaired for fifty years. Thus Meaney's delivery wasn't that of the practised raconteur; it resembled, if anything, that of the layman who, called upon to give a reading at Mass, carefully pronounces the word of the Lord with a wooden disregard for nuance or phrasal flow, thus giving the impression to the congregation that he doesn't wholly grasp what he's reading – an extract from a letter of St Paul to the Thessalonians, say – and indeed that he is not so presumptuous as to seek to grasp it. That task – of stoking the text and bringing forth its flame of significance – is for the priest and his homily. In this way the wooden reader lays claim to the neutrality and the integrity of the messenger, irresponsible for the message and, famously, not to be shot for its contents. So a rhetorical question jumped to mind as Meaney came to the end of his tale: if it hadn't been honed in the telling but in the remembering, just how many thousands of times must he have turned it over in his mind? *Why* Meaney had without cease revisited and toyed with that summer's week in 1943 was, from one perspective, self-evident. Who, in his shoes, would not? Apart from anything else, what had happened to him was highly unusual and possessed of those special ingredients – running from pursuers, gunfire, absolute danger, valour, starry and not-so-starry nights, the ebb and flow of luck – which are, as our experience of the movies tells us, practically irresistible. Listening to him, in the over-priced restaurant of a hotel in

County Limerick, I was enthralled, and I assumed that my wife, who was all the while seated to my right, was just as rapt. But after Meaney rose and made his excuses, it was clear from her taut, flushed expression that she was angry – that she had *flown into a fury*. At such a moment a thousand thoughts can enter the mind of a husband, but in this case it struck me that the last time I had seen my wife in such a visible state of agitation was, perhaps, when she fell from the skies into my life as I was sitting on the boundary of the cricket ground at College Green, in the heart of Dublin. Viv Richards pads were strapped to my legs, by my side were David Gower gloves and to hand was my bat, a tape-thickened Gray Nicholls whose blade was marked with the scarlet traces of long-gone cricket balls. I was lost in the kind of reverie which, I imagine, often absorbs the waiting batsman, at once studying the bowling (for signs of hostility, swing, cunning) and the wicket (for signs of lateral deviation, untoward bounce, speed) and replaying in the mind, with despair, longing and pride, old innings glorious and blundering. It is extraordinary just how clearly I continue to remember the cover drives, hooks, glances and sweeps of yesteryear, and how ineradicable is the sensation of a sweet connection of the swinging bat and the cricket ball, and how frequently I am haunted by the ghosts of shots past and consumed by a yearning for the bliss of batting which sends me out, every summer, to the cricket fields, whose smell when mown in early May induces in me pangs of emotion that I have not the slightest hope of explaining. By the time the freakish precipitation that was my wife-to-be fell in the square, the players had scattered and a small crowd of onlookers gathered. My wife landed quite daintily, but nevertheless her ankle turned painfully on contact with the earth, providing me with opportunity, as the driver of a car, to take her to the hospital. I clearly remember folding up the collapsible cloud of her parachute into the boot of the shit-brown Triumph Dolomite 1500 that I had purchased from a flat mate from the north of England who was leaving for the erotic pleasures of Thailand, permanently if possible, and was divesting himself of his every belonging in order to maximise the amount of money at his disposal for

fucking, buggering and fisting the childlike – for all I know, childlike because they were in fact children – unfortunates who awaited in Phuket and its environs. How Goodfellow – that was his name – imagined living out his forty, perhaps even fifty, remaining years in Thailand is a mystery I have never sought to penetrate, although I guessed that one element of the baffling compound his migratory desire made up was an urge to escape the attentions of the social security fraud investigators, who for some time had been paying visits to the house which I shared with Goodfellow and two others, and that another element was his unusual belief that an ability and inclination to engage with cryptic crosswords – which ability and inclination he undoubtedly possessed – took care of precisely fifty-one per cent of one's need for diversion and relaxation, even happiness. It was pointed out to Goodfellow by Robert Condor, our landlord, that units of happiness were not akin to shares in a corporation or to votes in an election, and that the statistic of fifty-one per cent was, in the context suggested by Goodfellow, meaningless. Although Condor, a self-described aviator, was plainly right, it may be that his sour correction of his tenant's theory arose from an envy of the latter's seemingly easy proximity to contentment, whereas he, Condor, was no happier than any man could be who believed that he was, or was troubled by the profound suspicion that he might be, the unacknowledged son of Adolf Hitler. Condor's conjecture – borne out, he maintained, by the year of his birth (1941), physical similarity to the Führer (same height, same greasy, dark locks) and mysteriously total dissimilarity to and lack of rapport with Mr and Mrs McDougal, the Scottish railway porter and humble housewife who purported to be his parents – was that his swaddled infant self had been flown into Scotland with Rudolf Hess and had thereafter, by hook or by crook, been taken into the local populace. Condor's – alternatively, maybe more accurately, Hitler's – Germanic origins became manifest on the anniversary of the firebombing of Dresden, when, overcome by blues, he would sit all day staring into the perpetual incandescence of his logfire-mimicking gas fire, morosely nursing the bottle of gin which finally in the evening he hurled in tears at the television, missing. Condor's

other obsessions were airships (of the dirigible zeppelin variety) and a lust for boys, the latter proclivity nourished primarily by the arrival, for occasional weekend visits, of twelve- and thirteen-year-olds delivered like milk to the Condor doorstep by parents of extraordinary naïvety or malevolence, and secondarily by my friend Albert, whom Condor had taught at an English prep school and sexually admired ever since, and whose aloof, faintly angelic presence was in itself sufficient consideration for his (Albert's) and my otherwise gratuitous occupation of Condor's Georgian house. Leaving university with a degree in anthropology, Albert joined the British navy and for five years served on a succession of diesel-powered submarines, a demi-decade spent in a black, undersea *Welt* whose thanatoid fathoms I need only contemplate for a moment before I must, in order to suppress the horror that overwhelms me, *mentally bolt*: which is to say, think helter-skelter of something else, and then pronto of something else again, anything – Lucky Luke, say, the itinerant, chain-smoking cowboy who can draw a gun faster than his shadow and whose every adventure (recorded in superb *bande déssinée* books written, until his death, by the great Goscinny and drawn and inked by Morris, which inexplicably appear to have not been translated into English) concludes with him riding into the sunset on Jolly Jumper, singing 'I'm a poor lonesome cowboy and a long way from home' and, I imagine, modestly contemplating his life as a power of good, a role which often brings him into contact with the four Dalton brothers, a fraternity of desperadoes of whom I can only name Joe, the shortest and meanest, and Averell, the tallest, stupidest and most ravenous; or, say, whether I have left it too late to resume the downhill skiing career that began and ended with three weeks spent as a thirteen-year-old on the slopes of Verbier on the advice of the school doctor who diagnosed a weak chest and prescribed, rather amazingly, mountain air. The problem with such desperate, random leaps – which I suspect make my wife, a woman wondrously free of dread, uneasy – is, of course, the problem of the fat and the fire: for how easily is nausea's sizzle replaced by the intolerable blaze of anguish, a conflagration which seems to intensify and spread with such ferocity as one

grows older that one might take the world for nothing more than infernal kindling. I sometimes wonder whether this progressive gloominess is peculiar to me or whether others I knew years ago but no longer see have undertaken the same deplorable voyage, the likes of Goodfellow and Condor, and then I ask myself, *What weight should I attach to these personages?* Years ago, when I was eighteen, I spent a few months at a language school in Switzerland. It was the custom of the establishment to pair off the students into conversational duos, and thus it fell to me to lunch daily with a demure Japanese girl called Banana, no easy task since she was, as I rapidly discovered, untalkative by nature and seemingly unable to initiate or prolong any kind of confabulation. Day after day I racked my brains for talking points, but no sooner did I raise a topic than it was quickly and finally extinguished by a short, undigressive, to-the-point yet nevertheless friendly response from Banana, until eventually I was driven to dreaming up more and more outlandish and outrageous gambits, like asking my unforthcoming friend whether or not it was true that Japanese men liked pissing in public, and did her male compatriots in fact like to eat raw fish served on a naked woman, which might be to say pudendal tuna and mammary salmon dunked in a dark umbilical body of soy sauce? I never saw Banana again after leaving Lausanne, but for some reason I received a Christmas card from her for years afterwards, elaborate and beautiful constructions of paper I barely read and never responded to, until eventually I moved and received no further word from her and never even noticed the same; then, last May, there lay on the doormat a night-blue envelope that was plainly the veteran of numerous redirections, and upon opening the stalwart missive I found a three-and-a-half-year-old Christmas card from Banana. Banana! After a hiatus of eight years, I at once flooded with a powerful affection for my fruit-onymous interlocutor of old and felt for the first time like writing back, felt, in fact, that I owed it to her, that she had by epistolary persistence made up for the reticence of those Lausanne lunch-hours, felt, moreover, that she was counting on me in some deep way, and felt, all in all, that this postal

miracle was a sign of some kind – a sign of significance. Banana was now suddenly *weighty*, with the sequel that a hitherto near-forgotten time of my life now figured in my mind as an epoch of note, although I am damned if I know whether the freight of remembrance has the calamitous sinking effect of rocks tied to the swimmer or whether it is akin to the (in my view) felicitous sandbags that keep the Montgolfier balloonist from floating away on stratospheric breezes, which is not to say I know anything about whether our true element is, at bottom, aquatic, ethereal, terranean, subterranean, extraterrestrial or none of the foregoing, a puzzle into which I do not wish to enquire too closely because I have a terrible inkling of its *all too probable* answer, the puzzle therefore standing, so far as peace of mind is concerned, in the same relation to its solution as do the pigeons to the cat, and the prone and sleeping dog to the awakening boot. So I sat down to write, in the polite idiom of the pen-pal, a fifty-word synopsis of my adulthood for Banana's benefit, but no sooner had I selected one of the biros that ramify from the graphical tree growing in a cup on my desk than I was arrested by the sound of ping-pong being played, a sound which of course principally consists of two distinct noises, the first – a slightly rattly crack (the *ping?*) – of ball on table, the second – a hollow, less resonant thock (the *pong?*) – of rubber-faced paddle on ball. I was transported momentaneously to a table tennis tournament of my youth held in a cavernous gymnasium where thousands of kids, it seemed, swarmed around thousands of tables in a blizzard of looping balls, and where the air roared with the racket made by smashes, serves and topspinners mingled with the squeaking din of rubber-tipped shoes scraping the floor, a cacophony which gradually diminished as each round of the knock-out competition progressed and more and more tables were folded away and fewer and fewer players occupied the floor and the forces of silence steadily gained ground, the eliminated (like me) watching their eliminators themselves being eliminated by others who were in turn eliminated, until at last there were left only two players, two marvellous players hopping around the last green table for all they were worth, and the sound of one ball only being

struck in that huge gym, *ping, pong, ping, pong,* until finally the champion emerged, aglow, and the last-mentioned sound ceased altogether.

SEAN O'REILLY

The Good News

Hanley was spotted running around in the fog. He was running around and laughing and shouting in the square – at the walls, the emptied buildings. He was clapping his hands. There was squabbling and jabbing among the birds on the tower which he looked up at and then he disappeared in the fog. He came back into sight running across the square with Zenny Kelly – the last of the name – wandering behind with his arms held out like there was still hope. Hanley hid up against the wall. Zenny stumbled on and fell and got up again and went down for good under the fog. The birds stirred on the slopes of the tower and some lifted and swooped. Hanley climbed a bit of wall and jumped down again and ran to the corner of Strand and hid in there in a door.

Once there was a bakery on Strand and that's where Curtsy Shields sleeps in the old oven. Curtsy was stretching himself and cursing out in the morning air and Hanley clapped his hands across the way in the fog. We all know Curtsy – he talks without restraint but claims to remember nothing. When he thumped on the door of the Ditch it was a long time before any of us would listen to him. It was more time still before he was believed.

Curtsy told us that Hanley sat behind the wheel of a wreck on Strand and pretended to be going somewhere, steering and swerving. He got out and pulled open the boot and some thing like a snake reared up and licked the fog. Then Hanley went behind the buildings to the river and away from there again into Sand Street – like he was confirming the river was there yet. For a long while he leaned against a wall, for no good reason in Curtsy's opinion. Hanley took the hill up to Abercorn and the alley after that and out underneath the giant trellis woven out of the debris of the city and higher than – Alta says there will be nothing

higher by the time they're done. In the end they came to Mill Street and Curtsy told us the fog was thinning and Hanley stopped and knocked on a window. Curtsy decided on the spot that he'd had enough and ran the length of the way back and punched on the silver door of the Ditch.

Jimmy Mulvey got up on a table and quietened the din of us. Some were wondering what it was all about and who this Hanley was – the younger ones didn't know the name. Jimmy Mulvey stood on the table and banged his hammers on the ceiling.

– I was there thon day. I saw it. We all saw it. We buried him. Aye, this Hanley. That was ten years ago yousens. We put him under. Hear that.

A crowd ganged on the door to get out. There was a scrap in the corner and that ended with Wee Frankie Wells being killed, which brought us all some peace. Jimmy said some words about Wee Frankie and ordered his body to be taken out. The feet were no sooner through the door and the scraping and shouting started again. Jimmy threw the hammers around the place – Indian and NoNails blocked the door. Ones wanted to go straight out and grab Hanley but Jimmy was – Jimmy thought there would be no benefit and shouted that there were things to find out first. Not many cared and wanted to get Hanley back in the ground and they climbed up on the tables – Yelter, Larry FitzGrade, Brendan Heights, they all got up on the tables and said there was nothing to find out.

– He's dead and that's your lot. He shouldn't be here – that's what they were shouting around and ones cheering and agreeing.

– I know him, Jimmy was shouting back. I went round with him. There was once and we were out by the castle just me and him. There was this storm and we were there trapped for two days. You couldn't see. There was no point. We got back and they were all suspicious and thought we had done something or went some place. Somewhere. They locked us up. Hear that.

We were all looking at him telling us this, which wasn't like Jimmy – the hammers were up each side of his face like he would crush his own head if he wasn't heard. It brought the order back – the sight of him roaring and remembering. Jimmy got down from the table and took his time to pick three of us to go out with him

and establish if it was all happening like Curtsy was saying and where Hanley was. Curtsy was over against the wall showing ones how Hanley clapped his hands.

One of them hasn't been seen since – Jimmy says they got to the hill and looked around and Jotter Deery wasn't there any more. In Mill Street they kicked in any doors but there was only one house with a man in it who turned out to be Nestor Hegarty of the old Torchmen and he was lying on the floor in a blanket. Jimmy asked him some questions but Nestor was too weak – he was starved and shivering. Nestor shook his head about knowing any Hanley. They left him there and pulled the door back.

Jimmy took the other two with him to Hanley's sister on Cove Lane not far away. More of the buildings there had people in them. They had to climb across the trench – Cove was the first street with trenches to keep the dogs away and anything else. Bronagh stood at the door with her new man Roy behind her and in the back was Roy's mother with a stick.

– Yer brother's back, Jimmy told the sister.

– Is that all then? Bronagh said.

Further in they could see the shadows of ones moving about – and their voices and a man's voice started a song.

– Singing? went Jimmy.

Bronagh watched him.

– You'd need to watch yourself, Jimmy warned them and he looked across the road at a destroyed house.

Bronagh laughed in his face.

– He's not shown, Jimmy, Roy said.

– We have to find out what he wants, Jimmy went on. It must be something.

Bronagh spat on the ground and went back in. The old mother seemed to be sleeping up against the wall.

– You have to let us check, Roy. Inside, Jimmy said.

Charlie Nift was allowed in on his own to do the search – Charlie knew the sight of Hanley and Jimmy thought it was less risk if he stayed on the street in case there was a trap. Jimmy and the other young one Killian Houston waited on the street – they sat in a window of a house with the roof blown out like the force had come from within the walls. All we know then is young

Houston is standing in the shadows in the Ditch – none of us noticed him come back. Jimmy and Charlie turned up afterwards. Young Houston won't speak about what happened while they were waiting on the street and Jimmy laughs when you ask him. Charlie was in the Hanley house so he just shrugs – Charlie said there was about thirty of them inside the place.

Lousy Morrison was probably the next to see Hanley. There were enough reports of sightings around the town and one out on the hill near the castle and one in the sky with a balloon. Too many will say anything to make themselves big. Lousy was out on his boat and noticed a figure under the crane legs, walking around – he rowed himself in quickly and went up to the stranger. This is the way Lousy tells it.

– D'ye need a hand there, son? Tell me to mind my own business like . . . but if you need a hand . . . Have you lost something?

The figure stopped but didn't turn around. There was just the back of him. He was in a suit and the jacket was ripped at each shoulder. Lousy sensed a bad feeling and gave room between them.

– Maybe you haven't lost something and I'm wrong. That was me out there on the boat. Did you see me?

He pointed out to where he was in the water. The figure turned and looked at the water – there was no wind so the water was scummed and still.

– I'm sitting out there all day on the water looking for something to do. The Staff was nearly black this morning so I have to get in the boat. That's the way it goes. There's no point in arguing with it. The rats been at you there or what with them holes? We all forget about the rats, don't we? Go on. Don't be lousy. What ye after?

The one in the suit made a noise and spun round. There was the white face of a lad about twenty and the scanning famished eyes and the lad opened his mouth and the stump of tongue flicked and poked out. The lad dropped to his knees like a dog – he was whining, Lousy swears. Lousy kicked him and ran and the lad came after him on his hands and knees. Jumping into his boat, Lousy swung the oar at him and knocked the doglad into the

water. He started rowing and didn't look back and when he came marching into the Ditch we could all tell he was annoyed and something had happened to upset his day.

NoNails heard it all from Lousy – Lousy didn't want to say and NoNails had to use every trick to find out. NoNails jumped up on a table. He pointed out another four of us and sent them out to the cranes. They came straight back in again arguing among themselves about what to do when they caught sight of Hanley and whether to lay into him or what. April and some of that crowd were refusing more delay and they were gathering round the table under NoNails to have it out – they were saying that Jimmy was off the mark and had to be stopped. NoNails was thinking about it – he was on the point of running out and doing Hanley himself just to put an end to the business. That was when Jimmy and Charlie came in the door and Jimmy walked into the middle of the crowd with the hammers in his hands. He was smiling too – a big smile on his long face and the hair tied back.

– Is young Killian in? Jimmy wanted to know.

We all looked at Jimmy.

– Aye, we heard from the corner.

Young Killian Houston was sitting on the ground – picking at the ground with his fingers, not looking up at anyone. Jimmy kept smiling but didn't say anything more to him.

– Good news, Jimmy announced to us all instead. There's things to find out.

He threw a hammer into the air and caught it by the claw on the way down.

– Like what? That was April said to him.

– Did you get him? was shouted out.

– Lousy was lying, was shouted.

– He's a ghost. A wisp.

– We're all lying.

– It was the same before.

Lousy was put up on a table and told his story again – Lousy was annoyed and reluctant. Curtsy got up as well and showed us the handclapping. The laughing helped settle us all. Jimmy climbed up next.

– We have to catch him. In our own hands. He has to be talked

to. That's what it means. There's a lot to know. All of it. That's what's going to happen. Hear that. I knew him and I owe him that. Right. Not to put him under again without a chance. The first one of yousens who touch him can look forward to me. Hear that.

April didn't like it and Jimmy landed him across the head with a hammer and he was carried outside and we left him in the road for the dogs or whatever else. April arrived in the town himself out of nowhere so he should have been more careful about shouting for blood from strangers – young Hanley wasn't exactly a stranger in any case. But we could tell Jimmy was changed – he was smiling and laughing and then he did that to April. None of April's crowd risked any more resistance. Jimmy was clear on what he wanted done next – he organised us into three groups and then we all stocked up and set out into the deadloss streets of our own place.

NoNails and us went out in a wide sweep to the fields and the sight of the castle on the hill like it had just appeared there and in again through the old cemetery. There were a few dogs around at the other end in the crypts but they cleared off and we didn't go after them. The whole town was below us in a dull mist that you couldn't see in the streets. We stayed longer than we needed among the graves – a ransacked ground, scratched up and strewn. The rats clambered through the dirt sucking on bits of bone – blowing whistle notes in the muck through the hollow shards. We looked down on the town and wondered what it must have looked like once with the river swathing through it and we all knew the sight would be the same then as now. We went on – down to the Lone Moor where the road was scraped away and sand blinded us. We crossed into Daily Crescent. Further on there was a low building without a front – we heard a noise inside it, metal sliding across bricks. We grabbed this man inside. He wasn't hiding from us. NoNails dragged him out on the road and kept him down with his foot on his back. He wasn't known. He said his name was Gibson.

– What do you want? NoNails started on him.

– Nothing. Not any more.

– Are you real?

– I am. Ask your foot.

– That's no answer. Have you seen a fella in a suit?

– Many times.

NoNails kicked him.

– Today. Here. I'll burn you.

– Earlier. Way over there. Up a wall.

– What was he doing?

– Dancing.

NoNails kicked him again.

– Dancing. Along the wall.

NoNails stood on his back with both feet. Nothing was said – NoNails was like a man trying to remember something. We left Gibson lying there on the ground and headed across the Ruts with that same white mass of sky over us, low and white and dented. NoNails went into the old chapel with the knife in his hand and came out and there was blood on the blade he wiped on his leg. NoNails said nothing about it and neither did we.

On along the Ruts we saw a crowd. We waited on them and it was Bronagh and her lot – about ten of them. We checked the faces for Hanley dressed up but they were all known faces.

– Have you seen my brother? Bronagh asked.

– What's the laugh? said NoNails.

– As if you'd tell me anyway, she said.

– Right.

– We had good times, Bronagh said.

NoNails looked away.

– He's my brother.

– We want to talk to him, said NoNails. That's what I know.

Bronagh spat at his feet.

– You know nothing, she said to him. But listen to this – that doesn't mean you're worth believing.

NoNails walked away and we followed him through the park and up the steep and we carried on as far as the big hall with the black brick and sat down. James started potshotting the pigeons and Shimmy climbed up the wall and got out on the roof. NoNails told him and James to quit the throwing and stay quiet. Then we moved inside the walls to get out of sight. Things were drawn on the walls in there – new creatures, unknown and gnarled, half-

born things, and the drawings looked like lairs for them, and nests of scratches and colours and these things were out wandering the streets and would return and lapse back into the walls. James was adding a thing of his own to the gallery, chalking a marred face into the black brick. Then we heard Shimmy up above.

– Who can see what I can see?

We climbed up. Shimmy was lying flat on a narrow ledge along the rim of the wall. We all leaned out to see. Down the street there he was – Hanley walking and hopping and skipping between the ruined houses as if it was some other street else he saw around him, in some other city, another time. NoNails told us to wait until he was nearer. We watched in silence – Hanley kicking the stones in his path and sauntering in his suit through the scattered debris and stopping sometimes to look at things or put his head into the windows and he seemed to be very amused by what he saw under that white sky sinking slowly down on us. Straight below us he stopped like it was necessary – a brick dropped would have split him. He clapped his hands a few times – applauding something not there. NoNails got ready to jump down on him but James was up and away off the ledge before him and shouting and clapping his hands as he went down. Hanley stood still – like any witness he watched stunned as the man came falling down on him. James was able to get a hold of him but then he landed badly and screwed himself up on the ground and gripped his own ankle. Hanley tried to make a run for it – he kept looking back, hesitating, uncertain of what he had to do with the falling man, whether he should help. Then – when he saw NoNails hit the ground with the knife in his mouth, Hanley seemed to make up his mind that help was not required of him. NoNails threw a brick which went near and went after him. Shimmy followed the two of them.

We lifted James and carried him, deciding it was our best move to make a way back to the Ditch. There were four of us, Macker, Jeep Towns and James hobbling. Shimmy had taken the gun with him and there was a risk of meeting the dogs so we were moving fast. All we had was two blades that wouldn't do any damage against Grin or any of the madder mongrels. We cut down through Fairman and through the hollow buildings into the bit of

scrub – the place where the well was. Jeep went up a wall and checked the road. He said there was smoke from somewhere. We took the back way down the lanes but nothing was met. We heard voices and took cover behind a levee of burnt wrecks until we saw it was Jimmy and the ones with him. Shimmer was with them as well – he said he'd lost track of NoNails and Hanley. Jimmy sent Macker and Charlie Green back to the Ditch with James. We joined up with Jimmy who was going back up the hill with some place in mind.

Jimmy was excited and – he was talking a lot and telling stories, about himself and Hanley. He had known Hanley since they were young, he was there in the fight with a crowd from the hills when Hanley died, his skull crushed under a wheel. Jimmy was saying too much like the stories were a sudden proof that all this had to happen – Hanley reappearing, us hunting him down through the scathed city.

– He's back for a reason, Jimmy said. News.

– Bad or good? one of us asked.

– What if it's bad?

– The same if it's good, Jimmy laughed.

– There's worse than that, Johnstone said. There's worse than bad and good.

– Should we listen to him but?

– I know him. Right, said Jimmy. We went away together. Beyond all this. Into the hills. He wouldn't show up for nothing.

– Sure he knows where to find you if he had anything to say, Jimmy.

– I'll know when I see him. Hear that.

– Know what, Jimmy?

Jimmy stopped and looked at Johnstone who had asked him what there was to know. Jimmy unhooked one of his hammers and – we all had the thought Jimmy was going to land him with it. Instead Jimmy hit the hammer against the wall of a house.

– Sold. To the fella in the nibbled suit.

In the house there was a ripping screeching sound and a layer of roof collapsed and the dust was exhaled in clouds through the windows. We all had a laugh then.

Outside a whitewashed house on Cliff Row we stopped and listened to the shouting. A few of us pushed in the door and Jimmy shouted who he was. Now we could hear NoNails and a woman screaming – NoNails had her against the wall under his knife and a man down on the floor wounded in the stomach. About five other ones were in the corner watching and a young one crouched at their feet like at the start of a race. Jimmy took a swipe at the wall to get calm but NoNails was still roaring into the woman's face and shouting at us at the same time that Hanley was in the place somewhere and find him. Jimmy gave NoNails a warning and hit him on the leg with the hammer.

– What do you want? NoNails said, turning on Jimmy.

– Here's a hint, said Jimmy and breathed on the knife in front of his face.

– They know. NoNails pointed the knife at the group in the corner. They know – I saw him come in. Myself. Your mucker.

Jimmy was looking at the man on the floor.

– You get them to talk, NoNails said. If they don't – they're mine. Right.

Jimmy stared back at NoNails now.

– Right? said NoNails.

Jimmy nodded but you could tell he didn't like it.

The man on the floor was Book McKeever – Jimmy had known him a long time. He took McKeever into another room and kept the rest of us out. We started searching the place with NoNails, up and down and under the floor and out in the backyard where there was a store of weapons, old weapons. We had ones surrounding the street – we were all there and other ones still turning up. When Jimmy came out of the room after a while we were silent and waited on him to speak. He stood in the middle of the room looking at the child. NoNails asked if it was his turn yet and sharpened his knife on the corner of a wall. The child – Jimmy took the child with him into the room. Not long later Jimmy came back out again and whispered to McManus who went out and took two others with him. Then from the room we heard the child scream.

– Tell me, said the mother. Please.

– Young Eamon told me what I wanted to hear, Jimmy said to

her, coming near her. He touched the ends of her hair. The woman looked confused, stared at all our faces, then at the ground. We all listened to the child squealing in the other room.

– I understand, said Jimmy to the woman. Your son there knew that as well. He didn't want to. Now he's talked but. He told me.

– So where's the other one? said NoNails.

Jimmy kept his eyes on the woman.

– Now he's talked. You know he has to be hurt for it. It doesn't matter. Book'll do it. Book'll teach him.

– Let's get on with it. NoNails came forward. You know or not? I hope you're not letting on. For your mucker.

Jimmy moved the woman aside and got down on his knees.

– Long time, he called up the chimney. It's Jimmy. A word in your ear would make me a happy man, Misha Hanley. Come on down, Misha. There's nothing much of interest up there. I'm a keen man to talk to you, Misha. Find out what you've been doing. Come on. Just think of all the things we could talk about.

There were ones on the roof started dropping stones first down the flue. Then fires were set at ground level under Hanley and flaming bits of wood dropped in from above. We could hear coughing inside the wall. Throughout it Jimmy kept talking to Hanley, calling up the chimney with memories and stories. NoNails was maddened by it – the useless talking. He went out and after a while we heard terrible agonies in the wall and the hiss of the fire going out with the boiling water. The wall was throbbing like a skin with Hanley behind it.

Jimmy must have had enough of the screaming – Jimmy started on the wall with his hammer, knocking away the bricks and some of us joined in with our hands. We saw the feet first, blackened and no shoes. Hanley was jammed in the flue bend – the hands wedged by his side, the leg twisted and the face as red as a newborn from the boiling water. Steam was coming off him. The hair was burned away.

– Look at the state of your suit, said Jimmy to him.

The house was cleared and we all went outside and sat in the road except Jimmy and Hanley and NoNails. It was colder now and the light was tightening and lower but – we were all talking and

wondering and looking forward to what would happen and any news. The child Eamon cheered up and we were all telling him about our own beatings and teachings. There was about thirty of us sitting around on the road – Indian turned up with his lot and they talked about meeting the dogs out at the Glen. Book sat upright in a doorway – he wouldn't let the wound be looked at. More ones arrived and the chimney story was told again and again. We all watched the front door of the house – like it was only in existence by our regard of it. One of the women started a song:

Hitch the witch to the mast
Tie the cry to the daydraught
The laugh to the bolt
The sigh to the lock
Take the heart
Take the heart.

Bronagh and her lot came running round the corner and stopped when they saw us all sprawled on the street in the sunk light. Bronagh went up to the women and asked for her brother. Some of our ones stood in front of the door to stop her going in.

– Jimmy, she was shouting. I have a right to see my own brother. Jimmy. I'm not going away. I've ones with me. We're not moving.

The door was opened by NoNails.

– We're talking to him, he told her.

– And what would you have to say to him?

– Maybe nothing. Maybe too much.

Bronagh started shouting for her brother – Misha, Misha, I'm out here.

NoNails shut the door and came over and sat down in the street. He had the knife in his hand.

– I think I'll take a bit of air, he said. And look. It'll be dark soon. Then what'll happen. Eh?

– Has he said anything? one of us shouted.

– It's amazing, said NoNails.

Everyone went quiet to hear. Bronagh took a step forward.

– What's he said? we all heard her ask.

– He was up the chimney, Bronagh, Lanks said who was near her. Bronagh kept her eyes on NoNails.

NoNails started laughing – it was a hard laugh with his own hurt in it.

– He's mine when it's done, he said then, looking at Bronagh. We've no call to be doing any of this. He should be back where he belongs. He's not staying whatever happens. Get used to that. Right.

Bronagh watched him and then a bad look appeared on her face.

– To think of the nights I spent with you, she said quietly, stepping nearer him. Do you remember them?

NoNails looked at her – a warning to be quiet.

– I don't care who is hearing, Bronagh defied him. Youse all listening? Let them listen. For if I could get to wipe it all out, destroy us ever touching, ever seeing the sight of you, extinguish the smell of you, I'd give anything. Anything. My own skin, my brother, my eyes – you can't even imagine how much –

NoNails swiped her legs from under her with his own leg and Bronagh fell backwards on the ground. Quick, NoNails was above her and the knife was out. We moved as Bronagh's lot did, surrounding them.

– Imagine what? NoNails was roaring at her. Imagine what? Eh?

He looked around him – he was glaring at the road, the fractured houses, the wrecks, the trellis on the hill, the numbed sky.

– Imagine what?

He straightened up and threw the knife and it stuck firm in the centre of the door. The door opened and Jimmy was standing there and he looked at all of us. He left the door tilled behind him and walked through the crowd and sat down next to Book on a step. With NoNails distracted, Bronagh rolled free and ran into the house followed by some of her ones. The rest of us waited on Jimmy.

NoNails went over to him.

– So tell us then. What was it? Eh? What did he say then? Tell

us all the big news. We're all listening to you, Jimmy. This news of yours.

Jimmy put his head in his hands.

– I know the news I have for him, NoNails said to us all. What we should have done in the first place instead of all this wanting to –

Jimmy turned and said something to Book McKeever beside him.

– He doesn't even know who he is, McKeever, soaked in blood, told us. He doesn't remember. Where he's been. Who we are. How to talk. He's a dope. Nothing just.

We all saw Bronagh as he was talking. She came out into the road holding Hanley's hand – Hanley was scalded and battered but he was smiling craftily like a child. The two of them stood before us, solemn and beseeching and bowed – none of us had ever seen Bronagh seek mercy. We heard the dogs savaging something not far away and still no one moved or spoke. We all seemed to be waiting, like there was more to come, like we had been there before, witnessing the sister with her scalped and grinning brother back from the ground. There was a terrible stillness in the crowd – it took NoNails to shake himself free of it. He went over and grabbed Hanley by the neck. Bronagh let her brother go without a fight.

– Look. This is all it is, NoNails started saying to us, pushing Hanley around amongst us. Why the silence? Why the shame? Look. Half-boiled here. Look at him. Don't let him disgrace you. There's no shame here. Don't let there be shame. We have done nothing. He goes back where he came from. Right. And now. No more delays.

– Jimmy? Bronagh called for help.

– No more delays, NoNails repeated and a few of us made noises to agree.

– Jimmy? We'll just walk away. Let us just go. You knew him, Jimmy.

– Don't let them shame you. Look at this thing in my hand, Jimmy shouted and lifted Hanley off the ground by the back of his neck. The lad's charred feet dangled before our eyes.

– Look at this. It's nothing. An idiot. Peeling in my hand.

A lot of us stood up in support. We were all checking how many there was on each side. It was dark now – a heavy aimless dark that seemed to leak out of us all, through our living hands and skin. Torches went on.

– Jimmy, moaned Bronagh. Don't hide. Let me have him back.

All Jimmy did was stand up and start walking up the street. He stood up in the midst of us and seemed about to speak – his eyes passed over us and then he turned and walked through us up the hill on his own and a hammer in each hand. Slowly a few more of us got up on our feet and went after him. We caught him up in the park. We went by torchlight, strung out in a line under the old trees where the birds shifted and shivered. After the park we crossed into Grafton Road. Soon in that night we forgot about NoNails and Bronagh facing each other and Hanley grinning between them – like we had been walking that way behind Jimmy for longer than any darkness or any knowledge.

We halted at the terrace. Nothing was said or wanted to be. The cold was an itch in the bones. Another trellis, about forty foot high, stood there – a hoisted grid of shrapnel. Alta says it is to give the world something to lean against and encourage it to grow again – but he is never satisfied, they are never high enough. We counted four fires on the hills, one of them across the water. A wind passed above our heads, salt in it and dust. Jassy was there, Donemanna Quigley, Charlie Nift, Hooks McDermot, Blare, Wee Satan, Epworth Hughes, The Red, Gary Hilary of the Hilarys from the coast, Dan Feeny, Shimmer, Hax with the split ear, Henry Folds, Bleuter, Brian Riley – they were all there.

In Juniper Street Jimmy dropped the hammers and carried on. Hooks picked them up. We went through a tall building with water pouring down the walls to a lane headhigh with nettles and Jimmy passed through them like they weren't there. Donemanna offered Jimmy a torch but he was ignored. We gathered around the bonfire spot in the field off Whitemore. Dan Feeny touched the ground and said it was hot yet. He blew on a shard of wood and got a glow from it, which cheered us.

Downwards from Beach Road was going well but – we ran into a small pack of dogs, maybe six of them. The lead was a big mongrel with a tiny head and eyes at the side like a bird. They

packed in close together and their backs went up. Jimmy walked towards them with his hands by his side – he passed through them and the animals snarled but made no go at him.

Donemanna went up the front of the line to talk to Jimmy – we all wanted to know where we were going, if anywhere. We turned the torches away from them, against the metal fences and the high steps as we were on the Crescent. A shape was lying on the steps, a man maybe, but we left it. The high fences hummed and quivered in the dark. Somebody said they were hungry and the torch beams flicked across the ground and prodded the night sky over us – spokes of light were coming out of us on all sides like we were some star fallen on a desolate planet. Then we heard Jimmy and Donemanna up ahead, climbing over a levee. We went after them but on the other side we noticed The Red was not with us any more. Brian Riley went back up and looked for him – Riley vanished next. Blare and Epworth Hughes said they had enough as well and climbed back over the levee – Jimmy had lost it, they were saying, we had to think about saving ourselves.

Jimmy led what was left of us to the Wrack Road, and the grass and thorns had taken it back. We were all cut. None of us had come out here in a long time. Jimmy went off to the side and across a field and along the old river bed. It was colder off the roads, and muck. We went near the Pit and the smell was strong and thick like fog and the torches were weaker it seemed. We kept on the river to the fork and went with the narrow channel. The trees cover it over at points and there was a smell of the leaves in our faces – the leaves smelled new and sweet, and they were hot against our faces. Hilary started a song and some of us joined in. It was better now to know we were probably aiming towards Lousy along the docks.

We could see the Staff like a tall red mast in the dark. We signalled with the torches but Lousy stayed hid until he knew who we were for sure. He came out into the fire glow with some one else – it was the Gibson one from during the day that NoNails had stood on. Gibson was in a big coat. The two of them were putting wood into the fire in the bath. The Staff was red to above our heads and then the metal was yellow on up to the tip which

was invisible, a pale yellow. We were all warming our hands and leaning our faces over the flames.

– That's a good yellow, one of us said for a joke.

– There's a chance, said Lousy.

Lousy has big ideas about his staff. It's a long metal pole stuck upright in the bath. He keeps a constant fire in the bath – Lousy says the Staff is the same length a man with a knife in his back will run before he drops.

Jimmy sat away on his own. We told Lousy about Hanley but nothing was mentioned about NoNails. Lousy wanted to know what we were up to and what he could do. We all sat down on things as well except Gibson who kept in the firelight. We were silent for a long time. Once we heard the dogs. Old rain blew in around us from the water and left. We were all watching the Staff for something to do – the red dulled but there was no change in the yellow. The flames died down in the bath around it – the noise of the fire died and we could all hear the bell rattling and lolling on Lousy's boat.

Soiled light swamped the docks – it was going to be the same sky again. Across the river the hills were white and unknown. Lousy and Gibson were standing close together around the fire and the Staff was hissing faintly in the morning mist. A few of us were walking round to keep warm. Jimmy was out at the edge of the docks, looking at the steaming water. Donemanna went over to him and they were talking.

– A new day, Hooks said, and clapped his hands the way Hanley did.

Jimmy walked back and stood by the fire, warming his hands.

– What do you think, Lousy?

– There was a new thing during the night. Not like what I've seen before. But I wasn't ready before maybe. A green. And smoke. Greeny smoke.

– I thought all night of going away, said Jimmy.

– To find what?

– Maybe to stop looking. They say it's the way there and not the arrival that matters. That's not the truth.

– No.

– I thought Misha might tell us something.

– He's no different than the rest of us. What can you say, Jimmy? What can you say about your life? What you've been through?

Jimmy thought for a while and then laughed.

– Where's my hammers? he said.

Hooks gave them to him. Jimmy hit the ground with one.

– Sold to the first bloody fool who wants it, he said.

We all knew we were going back then. Lousy took us back to the Ditch on the boat. He was in a great mood to have something to do.

Hanley is still around the place – he stayed on with the sister Bronagh but there's stories he's spending time with some girl now. There's no news from him. Often Jimmy goes to see him and afterwards he's silent and we all prepare for another wander around in the cold. NoNails and his crew haven't been seen. They walked off without a fight towards the far hills. Ones say they are living out there and building a place for themselves. There's others claim NoNails is in league with the dogs – he can talk to them and he's leading their attacks into the town. Ones will say anything to make themselves big. Lousy died – the Staff cooled and cracked when the fire went out after Lousy died. Gibson remains there but not much of him is seen. We sank Lousy in his boat out in the water. Jimmy will disappear for days on his own. A lot of us think he's not the same and his days are numbered. Another of us will take over – it's like Jimmy knows that and is careless and waiting.

EDEL MOLONEY

Dead Hound Walking

For a long time before it finally happened, I had taken to carrying a pen and a piece of paper with me when I walked the dogs. It soothed me to have a plan.

Usually it was Fingal whom I imagined suddenly dying. When he was a young dog, he ran himself almost to death chasing something that I never saw, or heard. I wouldn't even swear that what he was chasing *was* discernible to human sight or hearing. Some people laugh, but those hounds had a sense that goes way beyond understanding.

That first day in the woods, I was glad not to be on my own with a fey young hound. Later on, I was to be on my own every day with the two dogs, but by then I was glad about that, too.

The thing about an Irish wolfhound is this. If something goes wrong, the hound is too big to carry. At least, it's too big for me. At times I wondered if I could somehow hoist a hound onto my shoulders to carry back to civilisation. Like a biblical shepherd with a lamb slung around his neck. I found out that I couldn't, though.

Perhaps another reason why it was always Fingal whose death I so carefully planned, was that I knew in my soul that if it was Harry who was to die out in the woods, then all I could do would be to lie down with him to wait until someone came looking for us. I could never leave Harry by himself. Not even to get help for him, which I know sounds a little odd. Now, of course, both hounds are dead.

My husband left me long before my wolfhounds did. That time, he was the one with the pen and paper and I was the one unprepared. He left while I was asleep, which I thought underhand. Why not tell me what he was planning? Why not say goodbye? Surely, after eleven years, we could have shaken hands

and parted friends? He must have known that I wouldn't have tried to stop him. Too much had happened by then. Or maybe I should say had failed to have happened.

'Mary Ellen,' read his note, 'I think you probably know that our time together has finished. I hope you will cope ok. With sincere affection, Cantwell.' He left the note held down by his bunch of keys on the kitchen table. He didn't take the van and I appreciated that.

For a long time I thought that Cantwell had taken nothing at all with him and it was only while sorting through things before my own departure that I realised what was the only tiny memento which he *had* taken. To tell you the truth, that was the only time I sat down and wept to think of two fools ending their days in sorry isolation instead of comfortably bickering and barracking each other into the grave. But there you are. We never did bicker and barrack, anyway. Maybe we should have. And no matter what, I'd still be on my own today, I guess.

Fingal and Harry are buried out in the garden. It took me six hours to dig Harry's grave and, just over one year later, it took me eight to dig Fingal's. I don't know for a fact whether Cantwell is alive or dead but like my hounds, I sometimes have a sense of things and my sense of Cantwell isn't so good.

Cantwell and I were a little late in years when we married. It was he who gave me Harry and Fingal on our fifth wedding anniversary. I couldn't believe my eyes when two enormous, loping puppies flopped out of the back of the van. 'They're how old?' I asked in disbelief. I'd never had an adult dog as big as those puppy hounds were at four months. Oh, but I loved them straight away. Specially Harry. Harry and I belonged together.

Cantwell came to regret marrying me and that's a fact. I regretted marrying him, too. Maybe we were too old to learn to accommodate new people in our lives like that. We were both easygoing people when we got married; by the time he left we were like two heavy wooden stakes set feet apart. He was right to go. Living close with someone whose very presence dries up your heart is far, far worse than living alone.

You know how I came to feel when Cantwell was around? Ever seen an apple core left for days on a window-sill? I guess it was the

same for him. We never had a disagreement, we never turned spiteful on each other, we just were no good together.

Harry and Fingal were six years old when Cantwell left. That was when I started to make my plans. Irish wolfhounds don't live as long as most smaller dogs.

My line of thought was this. If something happened to one of the dogs while we were out walking – happened to Fingal, say – then someone might move his body while I went to find help. Lots of people go riding in the woods; lots of people go walking; lots of people even drive along the track, which winds upwards for several miles. Or winds downwards, I suppose, depending on where you're coming from. What if this somebody saw Fingal's body and somehow managed to take him away? Maybe to bring him to a vet? Lots of people are soft. They wouldn't be able to ignore the big, warm corpse of an Irish wolfhound. Wouldn't be able just to take a photograph to show what they saw in the woods and then go right ahead and have their picnic. But then I might never see him again. He'd be bagged by some strange veterinary nurse and thrown in a dump. My lovely lad. So my plan was to leave a note with his body. 'Please do not move my dog,' it would say. 'I have gone for help. I will be back soon.'

That was why I carried a pen and paper every day for four years. But in the end it was Harry who met his death in the woods. Wrong dog, right place. I didn't need to leave any note; I was with him the whole time.

Harry died on an October Saturday morning. The woods were shifting gear between autumn and winter, and the day was filled with a brittle brightness. We hadn't walked very far when Harry suddenly coughed and sat down heavily. I knew. I knew straight away and my heart was pounding as I tried to pretend that I didn't know. 'Come on, my sweetheart,' I said to him and he whacked his tail against the ground a few times and licked my hand, letting me pretend. Then he slid all the way down onto his side and Fingal whined and started furiously licking at Harry's face.

After all my planning, I didn't know what to do. I could only hope that Harry wasn't frightened. I sat beside him and stroked his head, and I tried to tell him how much I loved him but the

tears were streaming down my face so that all I could see of him was a grey blur and I could feel him getting colder. Fingal sat a small distance from us and every now and then he'd run up to Harry to lick him before retreating again.

Sometimes, you really do receive a godsend. After a short while I heard the sound of a car slowly approaching and, when I stood up, I saw that it was my neighbour, Mr Willard. He was heading up to collect logs and so his trailer was hitched to the car. He stopped when he saw us and he just had to glance at Harry to understand what was happening. 'Come on,' he said, 'we'll lift him onto the trailer.'

Mr Willard tried to slide his arms under Harry's shoulder and I tried to lift his hindquarters but the dog weighed 170 pounds and, although he was still alive, it surely felt like 170 pounds of dead weight. 'I've got a rug in the car,' Mr Willard said. 'We'll try to slide him onto that and make a sort of a sling.'

He turned to go to the car when suddenly Harry pushed himself half-ways up. 'Attaboy,' said Mr Willard encouragingly. 'Attaboy, Harry.' Now Mr Willard was able to help lever Harry to a standing position. Harry was trembling all over and Mr Willard and I half pushed and half dragged him the few paces needed to reach the trailer. Mr Willard whistled and shook his head in disbelief. 'Dead hound walking,' he said admiringly, but I thought that my heart would break.

We hoisted Harry up onto the trailer. Fingal jumped into the back seat of the car and I sat into the trailer with Harry. By the time we had driven the three or four minutes it took to reach home, Harry was dead.

Mr Willard had often helped me out before and he's often helped me out since, but I wanted no help that day to dig Harry's grave. At eight o'clock in the evening, though, both Mr Willard and his son came over with the car rug and they slid Harry onto it and gently lowered him into the ground. Then they made me go back in the house with Fingal while they filled in the grave; all the time the headlights of their car beaming into the blackness of the garden, making it seem as though they had been caught carrying out some terrible crime.

Harry was ten years old when he died. That's a good age for an

Irish wolfhound. Fingal was eleven, and that's even better, but I don't have to tell you that there can be no good time to lose something you love. Fingal had cancer in the end. The vet kept him alive as long as he could but a fine old hound doesn't deserve to suffer just to keep a rickety old woman company. He was put to sleep on a wet December day, lying on his blanket in the kitchen. The vet and I shared a glass of whiskey afterwards. It was a hard and terrible thing for me to have to choose the moment of death for an animal who had trusted me to the last.

Cantwell and I never owned a camera. Mr Willard came over one day when Harry and Fingal were puppies and he took two photographs. One was of the four of us together, me and Cantwell sitting on kitchen chairs out in the garden with the dogs lying at our feet. And the other was of me sitting on the grass, with my great, heavy-limbed puppies sprawled all over me. That photograph is the one thing Cantwell brought with him when he left. I don't know why he didn't want the photograph that he was in; why he wanted to be able to remember us but not see himself as a part of us. There were a lot of things that Cantwell and I never understood about each other.

That's just about everything, I guess. I've been ready for some time now and, finally, I'm getting to use the pen and paper. I'm getting to leave my note. All I've to do is to remove the key of the van from the bunch. I'm taking it because I don't know how else to get out of here. I'm scared of getting it wrong with a gun and I don't know where to get tablets or how many to take. The van is in the shed and so is a length I've cut from Cantwell's garden hose. I'm all set.

Me and Cantwell look so good together in this photograph. The wolfhounds are just pups. We all look as though we'll be here for ever. That day, it felt as though we'd be here for ever, too. Now, at least, I've come to understand that there's nothing to fear in leaving. All I want to say is breathe deep every day you feel rooted on this earth. Suck in that air. Because not being afraid to go isn't the same as not wishing you had reason to stay.

WILLIAM HODDER

The Flight

Airports had begun to remind her of hospitals. All the uniforms, bustle, announcements, the random geometric smiles. The permanent itch to get out of one just so as to end up in another. Delays, reschedulings, lost baggage, miscarriages. The polystyrene sympathy of professional functionaries. We're sorry to say. Circumstances beyond. Of course, it may be that something will in the fullness of time. She had even lived through days made bearable by such cursory android courtesies. Squinting, she caught a glimpse of the wet runway glinting remotely through the thoughtfully tinted perspex of the lounge. She longed to see the sky from home again, wild, angry, sullen with rain, growling like a belly full of stolen crab apples. She was in the mood for a real downpour, not this smog-rinsed sour spittle. After how long? Nine, no, ten weeks of it. Ten weeks of *in vitro* útamáling. Ten weeks? Make that years. How many days? And nights? And blank weekends? How many words in a prayer, hopes in a heart-break? How many rocks in an avalanche?

The public address burbled stilted circumambulent *politesse*. Would passengers for the blah flight to blahland please go to gate blah? The scented voice had the impassive lilt of a *mama-san* in a Thai brothel proffering cherry girls to sweaty roundeyes. She felt nauseous. Again. 'Yearning sickness' Terry once called it in his blessedly normal way of not pretending to-be-there-for-her. She was glad he wasn't with her. And relieved. Like when you throw off a pair of shoes you hadn't noticed were pinching you. Being alone was the only way. No need to be strong, to smile bravely, to nod stoically as the consolations fluttered thickly like autumn butterflies at day's dying. To agree, yes, I mean no, it wasn't the End Of The World. Of course, they had each other, a united couple. And there was her career. Most rewarding. The first

woman to do, to be, to reach, to earn. She was an icon, a modern icon. Post-modern even. Whatever that meant.

Funny she had never actually wanted to go into Advertising. Fell into her lap half-way through her Teaching Diploma year. Never yearned – to use his word – for Terry, never burned with longing like Dido for Aeneas, furious with love. He was hers for the asking. Never planned to get ahead like Gavin, nor like Rita counted the months to the next pay rise. Promotions and perks rained upon her like pollen on asthmatics. A semi would have done her and a little Renault to go to the supermarket in. Every day she negotiated a two-furlong driveway in a tulip-yellow six-cylinder turbo-charged fuel-injected Le Mons-conquering run-about. And all the shops delivered.

Suddenly a man apparitioned in front of her, all suave disdain like that Swiss customs officer last year. Like him he had a thin linear moustache slightly askew, as if some supermodel's plucked eyebrow were adhering to his upper lip. It made him look absurdly young. The fool of a man was yipping like an abandoned Pekinese and pointing up at something behind her and then to her hand. She looked down and with a kind of muffled surprise noted the fraying twirl of smoke as it rose from the slender brown cigarette cocked between long moon-pale fingers, the nails flashing crimson like broody vipers' tongues. She smiled an I'm-so-sorry at the pursing prig and thrust the cigarette into the gravelly sand that lay atop a glittering polished aluminium litter bin like the miniature replica of some beach long ago stranded by its sinking primeval sea. Her first in six months and she couldn't even remember lighting up.

The public address set up further platinum reverberations. *Mesdames et messieurs, votre attention, s'il vous plaît.* She allowed the Gallic vowels to gentle her tenseness and forced herself to savour the idiomatic rotundities of the language as it lingered like full-bodied wine in her consciousness. It was not until she noticed a congregation of fresh-toned Irish Eurocrats drifting strategically through a mist of garlic and Guinness towards Departure that she realised the flight home had been called. Suddenly the strangeness of this strange land evaporated. A lonesomeness tugged at her like a toothachey child at his mother's hem. The precise Parisian

chaos which had followed her dementedly into the airport from the manic peregrinations of the Périphérique ceased to irritate by its pointlessness. The expertly modulated rudeness of the natives seemed not loathsome but quaintly modernistic like the glass pyramid in the Louvre – a question of taste, not manners. The exotic blue-black Africans selling bottles of water and postcards on the pavements outside and their high-cheeked women, wordless as queens, were now as comfortingly familiar, as warmly workaday as the raw-faced stall owners at home in the English market of a Tuesday morning with their mackerel and tripe and undulating Cork falsetto.

Walking across the tiny corrugations of the concrete apron, the orange and purple colour scheme of the aeroplane surprised her more by its tastelessness than its unfamiliarity. She vaguely remembered the girl at the Aer Lingus counter burbling brightly about some technical difficulties necessitating the reassessment of scheduling options. The *Air Mondiale – La Choix des Belges* in signet-roundhead along the tube of the plane failed somehow to inspire. Besides, she hated charters. Who or what was *Air Mondiale* for God's sake? Terry would have been remonstrating already. If he were here. He'd give them scheduling options in several languages, including gattling-gun Ballymaceera Irish. If he were here. Thank God he's hundreds of miles distant across land and sea, tucked away in Kinsale fiddling with ultra-post-modernist yacht designs that make glass pyramids seem about as outrageous as Victorian door knockers. She wasn't up to him and his bloody cocksure single-mindedness. His refusal to believe that the whole world wasn't as malleable and as durable as his fibre-glass or whatever superenzyme was flavour of the season this year. At least he wasn't Chairperson of the South Union Conference of the International League for Humane World Farming or some such change-the-galaxy-from-your-parish nutcluster. Better prick than prig any day. Not, God knows, that he was either. A gaggle of geese. A murder of crows. A prig of spokes-persons. A trend of lefties. A glib of greens. A battery of feminists. A trauma of counsellors. A victimhood of minorities. A manifesto of liberals.

She smiled a slight smile of slender solace. Anything to take her

mind off flying. Was it really true that the word they have in Papua New Guinea for aeroplane means big-shining-heavy-bird-that-swallows-whitemen-and-falls-out-of-sky? Another of Terry's sarcs more like. A doom of 737s. A windshear of flight attendants. A coronary of pilots. Anything to take her mind off having to take her mind off things.

As she mounted the steps, her ankles flashed a spasm at the effort, while the drizzling mist, hitherto as fine as a haze of mushroom spores, suddenly coagulated into large blunt drops precipitating on her hair and face. A slight twinge, which decided at the last minute not to convert to a backache just yet, reminded her that her period was due. The Curse. Though, to be fair, it was only The Inconvenience. Never heavy. Four weeks like clockwork. You could set the moon by it. A dull throb the first day or two, then nothing much. And, of course, the awareness of nothing much. The sense of time seeping away with her flow. Of flushing another chance down the loo. Like a serial dieter, she could always try again next time. And next time. And the time after that. And if she managed to push it not quite out of her head for a while but into the shadows a little, nature sent his blackmail note every four weeks, taunting her, teasing her, upping his demands. Or else. And the doctors were just his bagmen, there only to make another inviting offer and, of course, on hand to collect the loot. And the female medicos were as bad. Worse. The men either openly didn't care or sympathised in that transient I'm-so-very-sorry-madame-but-I'll-forget-you-and-your-womb-when-I-turn-the-next-corner way that even good men have. The women in their fresh white coats and designer stethoscopes oozed empathy like eczema but looked at you with that mixture of pity, detachment, irritation and guilt that they all had for the big plain girl in the class who tried so hard to make personality compensate for a fat arse and pudding face. *Their* tubes were clean as a Donegal beach. *Their* eggs ripe as strawberries in July. *Their* uteruses reliable as Tenerife sunshine.

Inside, she found she hadn't a window seat. She remembered having read somewhere that aeroplane windows were round because they'd crack at the corners otherwise. She knew how they felt. The growl from the engines became an urgent roar that

cut her off from the terminal, from the ground outside, from France, the world. She wondered would a glider be more disturbing or less. To fly with symmetrical grace and in throbless silence like a bird when you weren't a bird was surely strange. And beautiful. And frightening.

Ten minutes into the flight and the inside of the plane had come to resemble a classroom. The passengers sat like dull-to-average children in row after row, bored yet apprehensive, looking up at the blackboard, waiting for nothing much to happen, now and then slouching self-consciously to the loo or bovinely chewing gum, anything to break the monotony, to speed the torpid minutes towards release. The flight attendants paced up and down, politely patronising them all, trained eyes on the look-out for trouble-makers. Like teachers, only much better dressed, they had an air of permanent grievance. The incessant engine noise had by now become a fading irritation like musak in a stalled lift.

She thought of the new job. 'A Sicilian offer', Terry called it, one, that is, which she could not refuse. She plumed herself in that peculiarly cramped way she had of dealing with success. It was flattering to be headhunted by Zimballist Cussen Phillips – ZCP, the premier agency in the country, as Senior Vice-President-In-Charge-Of-Being-In-Charge-Of-Things, coadjutor bishop with possible rights of succession, as it were. A wonderful opening – and a challenge! God, another fecking challenge.

She sighed and tossed off the dregs of her brandy, aware of the lingering fumes. No glass ceiling for her. She rose like a balloon, like a man. Maybe she was one or the other. Or both. Is it a bird, a plane? No, it's Balloonladyman! She wiggled her glass at a passing steward who produced another Hennessy with the facility of a prestidigitator. *Oh les joies de la Première Classe.* Bending over, he leered as he poured. She winked a slow wink. He crimsoned and scuttled into his shell of professional politeness like a scared hermit crab. She sipped the brassy liquor neat. She glowed inside. *Les très jolies heures de la Duchesse de Berry.*

The steward sidled blondly, lithely by, avoiding her stare. Ah sex. That never gave her trouble. She stirred the drink with the tip of her index finger and sucked it leisurely dry. No, can't blame sex. Falling off a log. Wham, bam, plenty more where that

came from, Sam. Nor Terry's little buggers. Positively nests of them swarming about like berserk tadpoles. Blind mouths. Not Terry's fault. Fertile as a swamp, Terry. Never seemed to take the business seriously. A man's best defence, really. She saw it in him. The way he sometimes looked at kids on the beach with their fathers of a Sunday. The uncharacteristically simple delight he took in his randomly transient niece and nephews. Her heart cramped within her. The pain was physical, that always surprised her. Her yearning, her despair worked upon her body more perhaps than on her mind. That body so admired by all, so capable itself of gratifying desire in others, that body of which she was so proud had failed her, dumped her in the trash with all the rest who couldn't get the hang of life one way or another. The wino in his darkened shop doorway. The drug addict slobbering over his needle in some filthy public convenience. The battered wife and her snot-raddled children forlorning picturesquely before the reinforced door of a back-street refuge. And she, trailing from consultant to specialist, Terry in tow, plastic cup in hand like a beggar. Her irises dilating with darkening hope – this time, God, let it be this time. Their scheduled couplings like on an Amsterdam stage. The clinical spreadeaglings, surgical fingerings, all the 'scopings, gropings, dopings, the endless mopings for results. And each month on the dot, like a Golgotha after each Gethsemane, her wine of longing was made blood. Each child born to friends lit another candle before which she fluttered merely to be once more consumed. The swelling bellies waddling past her in the street mocked the cool slim grace of her own elegant gait as she strode impeccably to profitable meeting or lucrative lunch. Six thousand million in the world. Six thousand million! What odds just one more conception? Even Jan from Personnel, the biggest dyke this side of the Zuider Zee, got bloody pregnant. By a gay blade, *faute de mieux*, she'd met at some black-is-white, up-is-down conference in Denmark, or was it Oslo? Said she suddenly needed to 'engage in meaningful dialogue with her womb, the source of all women's empowerment'. Sweet and suffering jeezis!

Christ, she could do with a smoke. She slurped some more brandy through gritted teeth. Across the way a little boy – she'd

always had a weakness for the little boys – was manipulating a double-jointed toy alien of revolting aspect with the absorbed dexterity that Terry brought to his computer graphics. She'd always loved Christmas Eve, brimming with the promise of toys tumbling from that stocking her mother had made, pink with lavender trim, and way above her, weaving through the clear frosty stars, Santa's sleigh – she'd heard its bells tinkling one magic night when she woke with a brief tummy ache from excitement – and her own special birthday card next to the crib for little Baby Jesus. Holy God. And in the morning, bright with joy, the beautiful dolls. All her beautiful dolls, all hers to cuddle and kiss, and wash and comb and teach and laugh with. Holy God. Stop, stop. She couldn't breathe. Sorrow constricted her throat like diphtheria. She jumped up instinctively from the seat, gasping. Dumb with pain, she jostled into the aisle and struck blindly for the toilets like a swimmer caught in a shoal of jellyfish. She barely made it. Standing in the narrows of the antiseptic closet she trembled from head to toe until the tears, waiting patiently since the specialist's final vast, empty shrug this morning, had their way at last.

The dysfunctional gargle of the flushing water seemed to mock her as she emerged she didn't know how long after. Before her stood a tall thin man, very French, very old, whom she vaguely remembered occupying the window seat beside her. He was elegantly turned out in a desiccated sort of way and gave off a faint aroma of eau de Cologne. He gestured with an upraised hand.

– Pardon, Madame. You are unwell?

God, she could do without this.

– No, no M'sieur. *C'est rien*. A touch of *mal de mer*, as it were.

He smiled a veteran's sympathy.

– *Quel dommage*. And on such a flight. Smooth as eggshell.

He flashed her a Maurice Chevalier grin. She nodded a further thanks and pushed past down the aisle. He followed after.

– Perhaps you would prefer to sit by the window. The view is quite spectacular. From the clouds every part of Ireland is as beautiful as Kerry. Especially this time of the year.

She sank into the seat still warm from his old bony body. Below the land glistened in the moist sunshine of a late autumnal

afternoon. He was right. It was beautiful. She felt him about to speak.

– Pardon me the liberty, Madame, but you are a very beautiful woman.

She turned towards him, aware again of her reddened eyes and the splotches showing through the hasty repairs to her make-up. She'd kill for a long soak in a deep bath. She smiled a gentle demur.

– Not now.

– *Mais oui*. Now. Then. Always.

He gestured to the window, twiddling his finger in an orbiting motion.

– Even when the sun sets it is still the sun.

– You're very philosophical, M'sieur.

– And when it rises tomorrow, Madame, you will be young and beautiful again, while I, I will still be old. Older, even.

She glanced out the window at the forty shades of green chasing each other like children at play across the soft landscape so far below and so near.

– You *are* a philosopher, M'sieur.

He inclined a slight bow of apology towards her.

– An occupational hazard, I fear. The result of an overlong acquaintance with the poets. Voltaire, Baudelaire, Goethe, your own Yeats.

– Ah, you're a professor.

He smiled, showing shamefully neglected teeth.

– In both senses, Madame. I taught literature for many years at the University of Caen. In fact, I am about to spend a few days visiting an old student of mine – and a dear friend – now working in Cork. Then I am going, as you say, *back* to Kerry to view the Great Blasket for the last time.

His steady blue eyes glittered suddenly in the shaft of sunshine that angled momentarily through the window. She forced herself to hold his gaze.

– I am so sorry, M'sieur.

He settled his bare frame into the seat and closed his eyes. He seemed to grow even thinner. He slanted a look briefly towards her and when he spoke the vigour of his voice surprised her.

– The good God gave me my time, *ma belle dame*, and nobody spent but I.

A moment later he was dozing, *lost*, she murmured to herself, *in the cold snows of a dream*.

Terry was waiting for her just outside Customs, his broad shoulders resting precariously, so it seemed to her, against the plate glass of the duty free shop. She had told him not to bother and had heartily wished to arrive unheralded and anonymous, as if to avoid as long as possible the relentlessness of day-to-day life. He smiled, his carefully hidden anxiety plain for her to see because of its camouflage. She was not expecting the relief that expanded within her. She wanted him to sweep her up like a child the way her father long ago used to carry her upstairs to her cot. Instead he hefted the two large cases which she was trailing on their irritating little tinny wheels.

– How are you?

He rarely called her by her name.

– Oh, my tubes are clogged, my eggs mushy and my womb, to coin a phrase, 'lacks adhesion'. And by the way, I . . . we . . . will never have a baby. Otherwise I feel fine.

He looked at her quizzically before turning towards the exit, the two portmanteaus dangling like shopping bags at his sides.

– You're looking well on it, anyway. 'Course, you'd look well on strychnine.

She fell in beside him, looking up at him, her face sudden with thought.

– I was thinking about the job.

She spoke with deliberation as if this was no spur-of-the-moment rush of blood.

– Of course you have to take it. No odds to me, y'know. I can design yachts in Brittas Bay as much as Kinsale Harbour.

This, she knew, was only half true but now it didn't matter. Outside, the sun was a flabby yellow balloon hissing light over the ridges of the farms that rimmed the southlands of the city. She spoke rapidly.

– No, that's not it. I was thinking I'd like to go back to College and finish teacher training this time.

He laid down the cases with a rattle, fumbling in his jeans for

the keys. She looked at him. The beep of the alarm made her start a little. She felt a need to exculpate.

– You see, I miss Yeats.

He swung the baggage into the Merc's yawning maw.

– Good idea. Never thought you should've given it up. You'd make a great teacher. Look at the patience you have with me.

The slam of the boot roused her to a smile. His answering grin emphasised his tan.

– If you're not too jet lagged, maybe we could stop at the Threshold for a pint on the way. *I* miss Arthur J.

As she reached for the door, she spoke, laying her other hand on the warm roof for emphasis.

– One thing, Terry. We're never going to get a dog, or a cat, or a budgie, or bloody tropical fish.

He looked at her and then opened his mouth and let loose a deep guffaw that rose above the car-park like an albatross which, spreading its great wings, flew south before them over the still shining fields, homewards towards the sea.

MICHAEL TAFT

The, As Yet, Unrealised Power of Art

Originally, he painted abstracts, but he was a minor failure. In one way he couldn't understand, for he based his work on exact formulae, recreating on canvas what specialists had discovered in corporate laboratories – namely, that when we focus on a particular colour (blue) even when contrasting colours are directed onto it (bright orange, deep green) we still discern the primary blue. Optical instruments cannot do this, fooled, as it were, by the orange, the green. For John Richards the implications were profound; what objective instruments could not do, we could – reveal the inherent world. But here, too, the theory deepened. Colours were no longer an objective science of light and wavelength but the world consciously ordered by our intervening observation. The meadow is always green so long as we are there, the sky is blue only because we look upwards and the woman sitting across from him on the suburban train – her rich, sensual, auburn-tinted hair: it was John, gazing at her, fantasising her, his hands running through her hair; not haphazard nature. The world has colour only because of the people in it. But though he invited everyone to his canvas, no one came. *Idealistic* was the critical judgement. His work remained in unsold stacks, the rich, sensual colours fading as surely as did the woman sitting across from him on the train when he disembarked.

Then his mother died slowly, a hidden cancer feeding on her, killing from within, in the last days leaving only a casing of a woman lying in torment in a public hospice; he buried her every day. Afterwards, to give it purpose, he painted her in sharp, expressive colours with angular shapes, like pieces of a broken mirror. Looking at it, a friend said, 'It's as if she were dying on the canvas.' And when she rang John days later she said, 'I can't sleep. Your mother is dying in my head.'

Richards catalogued all the ways to die – highway pile-ups, freak accidents in the family home, disease, mistakes on the operating table, inevitable old age. He first imagined the canvas bleeding to the edge in recognisable human form, the slow anguish of withdrawing life; then with paint. He became a minor success, drawing qualified praise, his work representing the tentativeness of living, all ending without abstraction. That was the critical judgement.

'How does it feel, this postponed success?' asked his long-time friend, but Richards just shrugged. He enjoyed the sales, the money, the returned phone calls from normally diffident agents. But he was the first to appreciate its limits, for where is the long-term narrative in the single unintended death? Where is the clash of subjectivities? He continued to paint and sell, but more and more he took long solitary walks, lying in bed, unable to sleep, forethinking.

It was while he was reading a newspaper article: a young woman and her son, their hands and feet bound by electrical cords, shot in the back of their heads execution-style, their bodies dumped in a skip near a deserted warehouse. First, there is horror, then repulsion, then a leftover numbness. And yet, after all the newspaper column inches, the television news images, the fully reported funerals, the details of each stage in the subsequent police investigations – all this was not an act apart. It involved human will, it invited participation, if even vicariously – to describe, to construe, to purge. It called for art.

John painted new canvases, single moments of continuous narrative – the gun, the knife, the disguised bottle of poison; sometimes he incorporated the perpetrator but never a face – an arm only, a silhouette, a reflected image in fractured glass. But he always fully composed the victim. For art demands an object.

'I feel as if the gun is trying to find me,' said his friend after looking at his emerging work. John evolved a more realistic style with just that element of disjunction so as not to be mistaken for mere chronicle. He was now painting murder.

In this way did John Richards achieve greater success.

■

The out-of-place men in functional overcoats stood in front of the painting in the fashionable city-centre gallery. Neither of them would describe himself as an art lover, but then they weren't there to buy. Sean O'Connor wrote detailed notes, Robert Maguire impassively scrutinising the entire space of the canvas as though looking for an implication. The animated gallery owner approached them.

'Striking, isn't it,' he said.

O'Connor looked up from his note-taking without raising his head. 'That's a word for it.'

'What can you tell me about the artist,' asked Maguire.

The gallery owner gave a history of Richards's development away from abstracts into images of dying, and now this present series. 'The strength is the ambiguity. We don't know the victim, we can't fully see the perpetrator. We don't know why it has happened. All we are left with is the haunting, crystallised image, a powerful statement of twisted human interaction without hint of causation or justification.'

O'Connor smirked. 'How much does one of these things go for?'

'Fifteen thousand pounds.'

O'Connor exhaled incredulously. 'All that for a picture of a naked girl with her throat cut?'

The gallery owner quickly tired of this man. 'I assure you, Sir, there is more to it than just that.'

But Maguire was more reserved. So when he asked where they could find John Richards, the gallery owner regarded him more hopefully.

'Are you interested in purchasing?'

'No. I'm interested in asking him a few questions.'

'I'm sorry, Sir. I can't give out Mr Richards's details. I can direct you, however, to his agent.' But when Maguire pulled out his police identification the gallery owner retrieved Richards's address from his personal organiser for it was the first time the police had entered his premises on business.

Outside in the car, O'Connor was still talking about the sale price. 'Fifteen thousand. Shit. That's more than I make after tax.'

'Yeah,' said Maguire, driving away. 'But you get to see the real thing.'

*

Curious, John Richards let the two detectives in. He lived where he worked – a large workspace in a second-floor studio apartment, a seeming chaos of paint tins and canvases and stacks of books strewn everywhere. Richards cleared a couple of chairs for the detectives to sit down but they chose to stand. While Maguire asked questions O'Connor looked through the canvases, some finished, some half-started, some with just streaks of colour and no image.

'Do you know a Christine McCarthy?'

'No,' said Richards.

Maguire showed Richards a photograph, a young woman with a warming smile. 'She lived in a corporation flat in the inner city. Worked in a nearby laundromat.'

'No, I don't know her. Why?' Richards could see the other detective looking through his canvases.

'Christine McCarthy was killed. Murdered. Last month. Found dead on the stairwell of her flat complex.'

'I'm sorry, Detective. I mean, I'm sorry for her. But why are you asking me about this?'

Maguire pulled out a larger photo from his folder and handed it to Richards.

'This is Ms McCarthy as we found her, four hours after she was murdered.'

Richards examined the crime-scene photograph and knew immediately. The young woman, lying twisted on the stairwell, naked, her throat cut, blood having pooled under her head and dripping down the steps – he had painted her, almost to the exact detail of matted hair and upturned mouth in dying grimace, the still-life eyes, the forearm frozen as if trying to defend herself even after death.

Richards looked up, confused. 'I don't know what it means. I can't explain it.'

'Neither can we, Mr Richards.'

Now O'Connor had rejoined them. 'You seen this photograph before?'

'No. I didn't see any photograph.'

'Maybe you saw her on the steps that night?'

'I don't go to inner-city flats.'

'Then how did you come to paint this?'

Richards shook his head. 'I don't know . . . I don't use models.' He saw the two detectives exchanging glances, as though there were more questions.

'What is it?' asked Richards.

Maguire stepped forward, holding up the crime-scene photo again. 'There's one detail in your painting – the knife, an unusual serrating, not like something you keep in the kitchen drawer. That was the murder weapon. The details of that knife have not been released. And yet you painted it. As though you knew.'

Richards put his hands to his head.

'Do you know who murdered Christine McCarthy?' demanded O'Connor.

'No.'

'Did you witness the murder?'

'No.'

O'Connor paused. 'Did you kill her, Mr Richards?'

'No.' And Richards was now almost shouting.

'Then how do you explain this?'

'I can't.'

Richards kept his head in his hands. Maguire nodded at his partner.

'Maybe it is a coincidence, Mr Richards,' said Maguire, opening the flat door. 'But I'm sure we'll want to meet with you again.'

Maguire closed the door, leaving the artist alone in his studio.

'You should have seen all that shit he paints,' said O'Connor out in the hallway. 'Corpses and blood and dying. Real life-affirming.'

It was a day's outing, in a park next to an ancient site, picnicking by a small stream in the dense shade of overhanging pines. The mother told the two boys not to wander far but being boys they dared each other on to one more dark plot in the forest while the mother and the father lightly kissed, enjoying the brief intimacy away from their children. But a short time

passed and the parents were calling out among the trees. Eventually they came upon the eldest child, squatting against a tree stump, his shirt torn, scratches on his face, staring blankly. The father put his coat over him, his mother embraced him but when they asked where his brother was he said nothing, just staring straight ahead, not crying, as though all emotion had been shred from him. For another hour the father searched through the forest while the mother, with her child, drove to the local police station.

Robert Maguire studied the fresh painting. If someone were to ask him, does art imitate life or life art, he would have laughed. His life was a series of investigations of real acts. Art was an historical novel to pass the time, a movie to fill an evening, background music from the radio. Once he used to go to a gallery with a friend, and she taught him how to look at a landscape, even make sense of colours and shapes that had no form. But he doesn't see her any more and so now he stays at home. This canvas – it was as though a forensic artist were *in situ*, painting the scene, making a record.

And John Richards. He had been in his studio all morning. He felt weak and sat motionless in a chair for hours. No colour came to him, no image emerged. The phone did not ring. He just stared out his window at people passing by, stopping for conversation, to light a cigarette and move on. Then, without forethought, without plan, he got up, went to a canvas he had started two days ago and submerged himself. First it was green, like a deep forest, then it was a small clearing, then it was shapes, like broken branches and small mounds of fallen pine needles. And then . . .

Three hours in the police station, three hours being interviewed, O'Connor sitting across from him, a young Guard standing in the corner. A tape recorder on the table and, Richards guessed, if movies were anything to go by, Maguire and others standing on the other side of the wall-length mirror, looking in.

'When did you paint the picture? Where were you that night?

Were you with anyone else? Did you make any phone calls? How do you do your laundry?'

O'Connor repeating questions and Richards answering, only to have more questions for more answers, for three hours. At least when they came to the studio apartment, with a warrant that Richards only glanced at, they were mindful of the canvases as they carried them away.

And now, watching in from behind the wall-length one-way mirror, the Superintendent asked Maguire where this was all leading, for though he accepted the unmistakable resemblance to the dead victim and the perpetrating knife, he could see no other connection beyond the canvas. 'You don't think this Richards is somehow implicated?' he asked. Maguire didn't answer.

A Guard entered the viewing room. 'Sir, you might want to see this.'

The pair followed him back to the storage room where investigators were inspecting Richards's canvases. The Guard pointed out one, a painting of a small boy, lying in what seemed to be a little grassy forest clearing, covered up by branches and pine needles, but lifeless, a belt tightened around his neck.

'A woman reported her son missing in the forest outside the city while they were on a picnic. His brother had been assaulted and is now in hospital. She gave us this photograph of the missing boy.'

Maguire and the Superintendent compared the photograph and the boy on the canvas. Maguire noticed a blurred implement in the canvas background and turned to the young Guard. 'Check if there's an old water pump in the forest. If there is, search the area.'

'You think that's where the boy is?' asked the Superintendent.

'It's only a guess,' said Maguire, studying the fresh painting.

The Superintendent also studied it, the boy's face writhed in pain and fear, not comprehending, in dark blues and reds and frozen purples. 'I hope so,' he said.

The father was inconsolable. He lifted the cold corpse of his youngest son to his chest and sympathetic Guards tried to gently pull him away, as much as not to disturb the scene as to move him away from irretrievable death. The two detectives stood close

by, in appropriate silence, but Maguire was looking across the clearing at the antique pump where, in times past, horses and travellers stopped for water.

'He painted it,' said O'Connor, as the father was helped away, crying in pain.

'But he was in custody.'

'He knew what was going to happen. He must have known who did it.'

But Christine McCarthy and the young boy – their murders were apart, one in the night of a run-down inner-city flat complex, the other in the light of a pleasant forest park; one with a special serrated knife, the other with a common trouser belt. It was hard to imagine a link. Except for John Richards. The only conjunction, his canvas.

Maguire returned to the station and brought Richards, who remained in preliminary custody, to the interview room. But it was only Maguire and he turned off the tape recorder, indicating that this would be an off-the-record conversation.

'Do you have a cigarette?' Richards asked, and though Maguire didn't smoke he bought a pack from the corridor machine and brought them to Richards. Maguire informed him of the discovery of the little boy in a forest clearing near an old water pump.

'Just like in your painting. Right down to the belt around his neck that was used to strangle him.'

Richards inhaled his cigarette numbly. 'When was he killed?'

'This afternoon.'

'I was in here.'

'I know,' said Maguire.

'At least you can't blame me for that.'

'No one's blaming you for anything.'

'Then why am I here?'

'Because there are some who think you have access to information. In Christine McCarthy's case, afterwards. In the case this afternoon, before.'

'What do you think?'

But Maguire didn't answer his question. He just waved the cigarette smoke in front of him.

'Why do you paint murders?'

'I make money,' said Richards almost flippantly, but he stubbed out the cigarette and answered more reflectively, 'When my mother died. That's when I started.'

'Do you paint anything else?'

'No, not really. The odd sketch, maybe. But every time I pick up a paintbrush, I fill the canvas with . . . some kind of dying.'

'Do you think you're psychic?'

Richards laughed. 'No.'

'Sometimes when people go through a traumatic event, like losing a loved one, it can change them, open up another sense. They may not even know they have it. It comes out in dreams or nonsense words. Maybe even by drawing.'

'Do you believe in that, Detective?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'Well, I don't. And I don't know why these images come to me.' Richards turned away, towards the mirror, and imagined the detectives on the other side watching him.

'I notice you don't paint gang murders.'

'They're not very interesting. They deserve each other's killings.'

'So you only paint people who don't deserve to die.'

'I suppose.'

Maguire sat there for the longest time, watching Richards staring into the mirror. Finally, he stood up. 'You can leave now, Mr Richards. Your belongings are at the front desk.'

'You're letting me go?' he asked, somewhat surprised, anticipating more.

'Yes.'

Outside in the corridor, Maguire said, 'And please do me a favour, Mr Richards. Next time you paint a murder or a corpse, contact me.'

When Richards left, O'Connor turned to Maguire. 'Why did you release him?'

'We've nothing to hold him.'

'We've got his paintings. The woman, the boy.'

Maguire turned to his partner and friend. 'I seriously doubt

Richards somehow connived before the event with the murderer so that he knew the exact spot in the forest where the boy's body would be found. A painting doesn't automatically mean anything.'

O'Connor nodded. 'You may be right. I just hope to hell he never does my portrait.'

And when Richards arrived home to his empty studio flat, all his canvases having been removed to police storage, he rang a friend who arrived later that evening with a bottle of wine, trying to comfort him.

'You're not guilty,' she said.

But Richards didn't reply. He just drank the wine, looking over at his friend, wishing they were lovers because he hadn't been to bed with a woman in a long time and tonight he didn't want to be only himself.

His agent procured fresh linen canvases but Richards did not paint. He locked his brushes away, folded his easels, stored the acrylic paint tins in the closet. He stayed away from his studio as much as possible, sometimes spending the night with friends or even in a bed and breakfast, just to be away from art.

In a pub conversation he once said, 'Maybe if I don't paint any more all the dying will stop.'

'People die regardless,' replied his friend.

'Not the way I see them,' said Richards.

From the sales of his works he could live for a long while without financial worries. But to walk the city streets, read books in the library, meet friends who would continually ask, 'When are you going to start painting again?'

John Richards went home only reluctantly. It was only when he had read enough newspapers – passion murders and car wrecks and the untimely death of a young celebrity; when he had immersed himself in grim television images – famines and fires and newly discovered mass graves; when he had walked the same streets and had the same conversations, endlessly repeating themselves; only then did he purchase a pencil and a small sketchbook from a newsagent and, sitting down in a quiet

morning café, start to draw again because people insisted on dying in spite of his sacrifice. First a line, then a circle, then concentrating wholly on the metal teapot in front of him, drawing without interpretation or disfigurement. Pages and pages of ordinary objects – a chair, an ashtray, a serving tray, an espresso machine – until a young woman sat down at the next table facing him, reading a fashion magazine but looking at her watch as though she might be waiting for a tardy friend or a lover. When she put the magazine down, staring without expression at nowhere in particular, Richards outlined the flow of her hair, the curve of her brow, deep-set eyes that evinced unspoken ardour – at least that's how he saw her. When he finished he had a complete woman on his sketch page and whatever misfortunes she might endure now or in days to come he gave her a wistfulness that was her achievement.

When he had paid the bill he approached the woman. 'Here,' he said. 'I didn't mean to intrude. But you might want this.'

She took the pencil portraiture – a simple sketching in an ordinary café – and smiled in gratitude. 'Thank you. It's very good.' She looked up at Richards with her deep-set eyes. 'Are you an artist?'

He just shrugged his shoulders. 'Something like that.'

He returned home at noon to find a note from Robert Maguire left under his door, asking to be contacted if there was anything new, which meant if there were more paintings. Richards crumpled the paper and threw it in the waste bin. He rang his friend and told her excitedly he had been sketching and how everything turned out what it should be, ordinary, commonplace.

'Beautiful,' said Richards, and his friend was delighted for him.

He took out his brushes, unfolded his easel, opened his acrylic paint tins and tore off the plastic covering from the fresh canvas. He sat down by the window and started to paint. He wanted to depict a simple landscape – a meadow or a mountain lake – like those artists of old he never really regarded – anything far away from his past works. And with a deep blue sweep, water emerged and then, with a semblance of black, the night sky punctuated by

dots of starlight. A nocturnal sea, mused Richards. That would do. And with energy he filled the rest of the canvas, unmindful of the time, the way he used to be when he worked with purpose, not even fully cognisant of the images that were emanating, the way he used to work when he opened himself up to colour. Hours later, still daylight outside, Richards washed his face at the kitchen sink. Drying himself off with a tea towel he returned to inspect his canvas and when he saw it for the first time after creation he became sick with worry and rummaged through the waste basket to find the note Maguire had left and the telephone number he had written down.

'I know who that woman is.'

'Who?'

'Beverley Higgins. She's a young Guard, works down at the station.'

'How do you know?' asked Richards. 'Her face is turned away. It could be any woman with dark hair on the sea front.'

'The coat,' said Maguire. 'It's an unusual design. Beverley owns a coat exactly like it.'

'Maybe I saw her with it when I was there. Maybe that's why I painted it, just remembering.'

'No, she doesn't wear it to work. Only on social occasions, at the club sometimes. She's very fond of that coat. Everyone remarks on it.'

The two looked at the canvas: a seaside front, maybe the dockside quays, a young woman standing near the edge looking outward across the water, not aware of the menacing figure standing in the foreground, the image of a dark shoulder on Richards's canvas.

'Has anything happened to her?'

'No,' said Maguire to Richards's relief. 'In fact, she's still at the station. Where do you think this might be?'

'I don't really know.'

Maguire traced his finger along a faint pattern in the distant dark background, taking care not to touch the canvas for the paint had not yet fully dried. 'I think I might,' he said.

*

The Superintendent was perplexed and O'Connor, normally supportive of Maguire's work intuitions, was likewise hesitant.

'You're basing this all on a painting?'

'He seems to have some kind of . . . prescience.'

'Even if it were true, Robert, why tonight. It could be tomorrow night or any night.'

'Maybe,' replied Maguire. 'But Richards told me that it usually takes days for him to complete a painting. This one he finished in one sitting.'

'Is this significant?' asked the Superintendent.

Maguire didn't know. So he said, 'Maybe.'

And though she was not under orders, for she was young and inexperienced in this type of operation, Beverley Higgins readily volunteered, an opportunity to display her worth, earn a commendation, lead to a promotion, hopefully.

Everyone worked quickly for night was falling. Beverley retrieved her coat from home and technicians fitted her with the smallest of receiver plugs for her ear, pinning a radio mike on her inside coat collar so she could maintain contact with the surveillance teams set up in the abandoned warehouses that lined this section of the quays.

'Keep walking up and down, staring out over the water. Don't look as if you're anticipating anyone. If you see anything, let us know but take no action yourself. If there is any trouble, leave quickly,' instructed Maguire.

Beverley Higgins did so, pacing the quays, trying to look reflective, even innocent, but alert to any close sound, a seeming footstep, a car engine – for three hours.

Inside an old paint factory O'Connor whispered, 'I don't think this is going anywhere,' but Maguire said give it time. After midnight, when Beverley's exposed legs were feeling the numb of the sea wind, a man with a dark coat walked up to the quayside about a hundred yards away from her.

'Just keep steady,' whispered Maguire into the radio mike and Beverley nodded slightly to indicate she heard. The man lit a cigarette, staring out over the water at the electricity station tower in the distance, as though he, too, might be lost in harmless thoughts. Maguire watched him through his binoculars. It was

only when he had stubbed out his cigarette on the ground that the man stepped towards Beverley, slowing at first, but then with intention.

'Keep your back turned,' Maguire whispered into the mike and Beverley moved slightly away, pretending to be unaware but informed of the approaching steps over her radio receiver. The man looked around him, as though he might suspect others in the vicinity, but maintained his pace until, a few yards from Beverley, he stopped.

'It's not very safe for a woman to be out here on her own,' he said, in a casual voice.

Beverley turned to him, making sure she didn't expose the tiny radio transistor in her ear. Her voice betrayed no hint of apprehension. 'I find the seaside peaceful this time of night.'

'Yes,' replied the man. 'With no one else around.' As he stepped forward, Beverley could see, over his shoulder, the Guards now looking around the darkened corners of the empty buildings, aiming rifles fitted with nightsights. She could hear Maguire telling her to back away, could feel the handle of the gun in her inside coat pocket as she slowly reached for it, as though she were warming her hand against the chill. But she stood her ground.

'I don't mind being alone,' she said with only the slightest of quivers. The man's eyes bore down, stepping closer, the slightest of grins, until he reached into his pocket and Beverley reached into hers, quickly pulling out her gun and pointing it into his face, shouting at him to stop and the police now running up to them, guns drawn, shouting as well, and the man standing there, almost dazed until he was knocked to the ground, roughly handcuffed.

Maguire walked up to Beverley. 'You okay?'

'Fine. No problem,' she said, trying to cover her agitation.

Maguire looked at the man sprawled face down on the ground, pleading, asking what he had done and O'Connor telling him to shut up, shoving him with his foot. Maguire bent over the man, reached into his overcoat pocket and pulled out its contents – a half-empty pack of cigarettes.

They questioned the man until there was no more point, his

biographical details having been confirmed: his residence, his place of work, a middle-aged man living alone and, being lonely, hoping he might chance upon a prostitute and buy some time with her.

'Prostitutes don't hang out on the docks,' O'Connor had challenged him.

'When I was growing up they did.'

And Maguire knew this to be true, knew that prostitutes had once gathered at the docks before they moved into the city centre, by the canal, by the green in the fashionable office district. When they released the man O'Connor warned him he could still be arrested for soliciting, but this was more a tactic to prevent him from filing a false arrest claim.

'Well, that was a real fuck-up,' said O'Connor afterwards and Maguire nodded.

'Sure, don't worry about it. Happens all the time,' he said again and Maguire smiled.

But when O'Connor left, Maguire didn't go home to sleep. He just stared out the second-floor office window at the first morning light over the city. Someone that night might have been killed, coming out of a night-club, sleeping in their bed, in a drunken fight with their spouse. It can happen any time and usually does. And the more Maguire thought about it the more helpless he felt. For there wouldn't be a painter, a photographer, a writer, an actor who, witnessing it, would be able to recreate it for him. He'd have to do it all on his own.

He could immediately see the painter had not slept – the eyes, the worn clothes, the dense smell of tobacco in the studio apartment.

'Did something happen?' Richards asked.

'Beverley wore her coat and walked up and down the quays. Eventually a man approached her. We arrested him. We let him go. He was just looking for a prostitute.'

Richards collapsed on a chair, exhausted, not sure whether to be pleased or not.

'I'm sorry, Detective. I didn't mean to mislead you.'

'You didn't,' replied Maguire. 'It all happened, just like you painted it.'

'No. If you hadn't set it up, it wouldn't have happened. It would have just been a woman looking out over the seaside and the partial image of a man, watching her. The rest would have been conjecture.'

'Well,' said Maguire. 'At least now we know.'

Maguire bent over the canvas one more time. 'It's a fine work.'

'Thank you,' said Richards, now tired and wanting sleep.

Maguire considered the woman on the quayside, her likeness to Beverley, the exact same coat but, noticing one curious mark, he asked, 'You didn't touch this up after I left last night, did you?'

'No. Why?'

'Just asking.'

Maguire said goodbye and left. He didn't raise the matter with Richards for surely it would have indicted his powers of observation, skills which he had developed as a detective, searching for clues in seemingly unsolvable crimes, but skills which, he now realised, are not so applicable to art. For it could have been a ring, or a piece of cotton or even an unintended fragment of paint. But now that Maguire had been on the quays he knew. The woman in the painting was wearing a tiny radio receiver in her ear. He hadn't noticed that the night before.

The police finally caught the murderer of Christine McCarthy, thanks largely to the investigative work of Robert Maguire and this made up for his failed stakeout on the quays. The murder of the young boy in the forest is still unsolved and parents are nervous because a small girl was found similarly strangled in a city-centre park after she was separated from her friends. Beverley Higgins won a citation for her part in the stakeout but she has yet to receive a promotion. Robert Maguire has even taken to visiting galleries, albeit on his own. But sometimes he imagines he'll meet a woman there who can explain the meaning behind colours. However, none of this was captured on canvas so, for the purposes of art, it has no immediacy.

As for John Richards, he spends his days sketching portraits in black charcoal on the mezzanine floor of a city-centre shopping mall. He might eventually have come to this point without the trauma of detectives and the suspicion of culpability, for how long

could he continue to paint people without life? Eventually everyone would die on his canvas and the world become empty and then what would happen to colour.

But friends thought differently. 'What are you doing, John,' they would say. 'You're wasting your talent.'

Richards would listen politely and every morning arrive at the mall, setting up his easel, his box of charcoal, dusting cloths, a foldaway chair and the sandwich sign advertising 'Portraits Drawn'. And while every shopping mall has its portraitist, Richards's informal kiosk drew extra renown and shop owners would complain that the queues running the length of the mall corridor were blocking their window displays. For people would leave with more than just a summary suggestion of a few lines drawn on heavy bond paper. Richards did not just circumscribe his subjects. He would picture this young man on the verge of love and that woman at the beginning of success. An old man became young again, a student achieved attainment. He would ask the children what they wanted to be and they invariably said, 'A doctor,' 'A rock star,' 'A football player' and so, in turn, the athletic bearing, the celebration of fame, the countenance of healing. All this, as if in a sketched likeness it might become so. All in a simple charcoal portrait that people would queue for between their weekly shopping.

But unknown to friends or anyone else, John Richards kept his best work for himself. He would pack up his materials every evening, walking the few streets home to his clean, uncluttered studio apartment. He would stack his change and, after eating a functional meal, would open up his tins of acrylic paint and strip off all his clothes. Sometimes with his hands and sometimes with a brush he would apply the paint all over his body, sometimes in bright, buoyant colours, sometimes muted, occasionally wistful. But always his entire body – every strand of hair, the face and chest, down along his back and legs, even unto the inner lobe of his ear, and the tiny gaps between his toes, until you could no longer see his original self. Every night, after a full day in the shopping mall, he was so. And were a stranger to peer in through the window they wouldn't know if they were looking at a curious man fully covered with paint or

a magical canvas that seemed to be alive, being and moving about the room.

Thus did John Richards achieve his greatest success.

JANE S. FLYNN

Extra Virgin, First Pressing

Like the old lads say, 'It's a long road that hasn't a turn.' And here I am on my own turf, squatting like a skivvy Sheila-na-gig wiping the floor up with him. That's metaphoric, of course. Not 'him'. 'His'. '. . . With his shirt.'

A pragmatist might see this victory as Pyrrhic, costing a litre bottle of Tuscan olive oil, time, energy, and a top-up dose of prescriptive Naprosyn for the housemaid's knee. (The patellas are shot so I can't kneel any more, but there are other ways to get around the dirty jobs and it's not my first time on the vinyl.)

Let me explain.

A lifetime ago, some time, my uncontested divorce for catchall 'indignities to the person' (a thundering euphemism but there were kids to consider) became final, I fled to Ireland for a palliative vacation. I watched the daily waves for seven weeks, AWOL from what barristers call 'the domicile'. In two shakes of a lamb's tail, black comedy exorcised the marital spleens of auld lang syne, and erotic green love made immaterial the bitter memories of exploited innocence and malign neglect. I bought a duck down duvet and a pair of Doc Martens, renounced the New World for the Old Sod, dug in and let the Blue Cross and Blue Shield medical insurance lapse. I never looked back.

One ordinary, indolent, west-of-Ireland January day, I received a letter from one Reverend John P. Noland, Priest Instructor of the Tribunal of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Maryland. I should tell you I am not a practising Catholic, not since 'Humanae Vitae' and a religion course I took back in the seventies, the year I turned thirty. That put it all up to me. I bloomed late, having endured a protracted adolescence of the psyche. Married at nineteen; dedicated mother thereafter. 'Tell me about it,' I hear you say.

Please understand, I bear no residual grudge against Catholi-

cism, even if I do have my own mind as to what is sacred or sinful. I still write 'Catholic' in the 'Religion?' line on medical forms. It looks better than 'No thank you'. My grandchildren, children and their spouses are all Catholics. My ex-husband married the youngest couple last summer. As in 'officiated at the sacrament of matrimony'. He's a priest.

That gets your attention, doesn't it? It never fails. Sometimes the irony backfires and provokes prurient interest in him instead of me, so I make sure of my audience before I flash the revelations and describe the day with all the details, starting with me underwired and corsaged in the frock with all the sassy ruffles like the original Chiquita Banana, determined to be pretty and nice and gay at all costs in the pew on my own-i-o, and him up there like *The Bells of St Mary's* hocus-pocusing in front of the six candles with the arms shaking embroidered satin, camping it up and singing even the consecration for Christ's sake over an American communion host as big as a pita bread that he had to fold into his mouth after that woeful sermon he twisted from 'What St Paul says Love is' into 'How good God is to me'.

'I am doubly blessed because I am a priest and God gave me these wonderful children. I am privileged to say the wedding mass of my son.'

'God' gave 'him'. 'His' son. And how did he fucking hatch them all, pray tell. In his fat apron belly like a seahorse? All together now, 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow'. No. Don't say anything. Don't be the bitch at the party. Detach. Deep breaths. Rise above it all. Ohmmmmmm. Even the stained-glass window over the altar is a bloody sham. 'St Patrick converting the Pagan Celtic Princesses' and the colleens under your man's crook are rigged out like the Arabian Nights. I sat through it all four-square on the bench like a Protestant.

Sorry. I stray. The Wedding Farce post-dates the missive from Father John-boy. First things first. Back to the letter with the Bishop's mitred coat of arms in the upper left corner and the case and number underneath, man's surname first, woman's maiden name after the dash, 'Black-White; No. 893412' and the attached mimeographed questionnaire form.

'Light a fag with it,' my partner in profligacy advised me after a

first reading. But, sober American that I am, I put it in the junk drawer with the appliance guarantees and mousetraps and suspect batteries instead. Please don't pigeon-hole me as an anti-cleric. I am not. I get on like a house on fire with the local curate and trade neighbourly salutes with the pastor whenever we cross paths. I still turn on, after all these years, just thinking about a certain Jesuit who bled himself onto pro-offered Selective Service registration cards singing 'Soul of My Saviour', and wonder where he is today and if he is still celibate. I can't even remember the anti-war seculars involved in the protest.

However, and in spite of myself, the religiously challenged anointed rub me the wrong way, especially my silly-bugger countrymen who holiday (gratis, with a car laid on, courtesy of a Florida pro-life lawyer with a taste for Irish golf courses) up the boreen in twos and threes. It gives me a pain in the ass when I see them above in pastels practising their swings, or lounging out on a fine summer's night in directors' chairs twirling fancy highball glasses with their precious Bruno Magli loafer feet on our dry-stone wall like they had the sunset and evening star coming to them.

Invariably they stroll down this end to size up the place and introduce themselves. 'I'm Monsignor What's His Face, and this is Bishop So and So's aide,' I got lately. 'How-dy doo-dy. I'm just Joan the goat farmer's wife,' I answered. A cheap shot. I love to take the piss. The next time I get a crack at one of them I'll say, 'Sorry for your trouble.'

Oh yes. Father Noland. My former spouse, he wrote, had petitioned the Tribunal to help determine whether an ecclesiastical annulment of our marriage could be granted. Himself, the Petitioner, would be liable for the costs: $400.00. The Respondent would get off scot free unless the case was appealed.

Anticipating unspeakable concerns I might conceivably harbour when judges unknown ruled that my solemn nuptialised Papal Blessing ten o'clock Mass didn't take place (those studio photographs of the bride in the white lace mantilla testify to nothing at all), they assured me 'there was no effect on the children of the marriage as far as legitimacy or illegitimacy would go'. Sic. Sick. How well they thought of it.

And how could all this come to be, I puzzled. The State of Maryland ruled the jig was up and directed the assets be split 50–50 with the adolescents deciding custody. What's the hitch for Holy Mother Church? Nigh on two decades of perpetual maternal attendance, cooking and feeding and washing up curds and whey and puke from cribs and carpets and mopping pulpy floods from tissue-clogged toilets. My only witness a worn percale pillowcase chock-full of clean rags. Terry-cloth towels not good enough for Pasha's daily ablutions for the heavy jobs. Redundant diapers for accidents. Spills ring-a-ring-a-rosy a glass a night in turn around the table. The tap of a tiny elbow or touch of a downy forearm, quick as forked lightning. Milk pooling momentarily on the formica before drooling over the edge and splattering into atoms all over the lino. It doesn't count. Go back. You didn't say, 'Mother. May I.'

I treated myself to a transatlantic call to my elder son.

'What's the bit with the annulment?' I asked after enquiring about the grandchildren.

'You're not gonna believe this, Mom.' He sounded like Danny de Vito.

'Is he getting married again?' And who's the victim so I can send a get-well card, I thought, but I keep malicious glosses to myself. I don't like to embarrass the kids.

'You'll never guess.'

'Okay. I give up.' Come out, come out, wherever you are.

'He wants to be a priest.'

Ah ha! He always was a big one for religious affairs. An usher, Sunday after Sunday, stationed before St Peter's side altar with the long-handled wicker basket like the papal militia. Genuflecting on both knees. Directing post-communion traffic sucking the host.

'What kind of priest?' I asked. Where would a portly divorced city employee clerk find succour? But then, they're hard up for vocations these days.

'An ordinary one. He found out about a seminary in Iowa for mature students.'

I reread the Tribunal material, annotated the margins with smartypants comments, decided what the hell, who gives a

jockey's bollix anyway, and you never know the way life is – maybe I could use an annulment myself if somebody asks me to be a godmother or if I want to be buried with my consort in the local churchyard.

> The grounds of annulment are usually some failure in consent, with lack of discretion in giving consent or inability to fulfil consent and the requirements of the marriage state as shown by the actions of the parties.

Broad enough for myriad interpretations. Like 'indignities to the person'. Three 'C' words in the same sentence, not one 'adult', and no talk of mysterious 'impediments' that used to be such a big deal.

Okay. You asked for it, I decided.

I composed a literate, logical, hindsighted reply ten hand-written pages long including the disclaimer (lest my analysis be construed as a chargeable appeal) and pinned the lot to their form, which allowed only two measly lines of answer space for each query. I was pure delighted with my work. It was a shagging good read.

And it came to pass. In four months flat. The Reverend Judges handed down an AFFIRMATIVE decision that nullity was proven in the eyes of the Church.

> You are hereby informed that you are free to marry in the Catholic Church so far as your marriage to Black is concerned . . .

It took another reading to interpret the double-talk.

They don't mean I'm to marry himself again. They mean I'm allowed to marry my sidekick here. And why 'your marriage' instead of 'your null marriage'? Would there be too many nulls then? How much wood would a woodchuck chuck? Nit picking. Don't look a gift-horse in the mouth. Not only were they wiping the slate clean for me, I was getting a bonus. A free voucher. All I had to do was present the damn thing with the embossed notary impression over the Vicar Judicialis's initials 'to the priest making the marriage arrangements'.

We got great mileage out of the possibilities.

'Post it back and say we don't need it but it's a shame to let it go to waste so give it to some other poor soul.'

'Hang it in the toilet for casual reading.'

'Cash it in, have a church wedding and wear a red dress.'

When we got tired of playing Can You Top This, I flattened the Reverend Monsignor's sheet between the nostalgic leaves of Alex Comfort's First Edition *Joy of Sex* and squeezed that oversized book back into the shelf, spine to the wall, leaving the Metropolitan Tribunal to fend for itself amidst the silverfish and woodlice that proliferate in the moist damp climate of fecund West Clare. But I could put my hand on it this second if I wanted to.

I haven't seen the first husband I never married since his youngest son's wedding, and now that all his children are tackled up I figure I'll be spared the spectacle of another family pantomime for a spell, barring second-generation annulments and fairy-tale endings.

He hasn't crossed my mind for ages, not until today, when I reached down into the bottom of a sack for a nice big rag to wipe up the oil I knocked from the press and dredged up a T-shirt that has been lurking there since I unpacked my clay pot Romertopf chicken roaster from my share of stuff from the family residence in Baltimore, and suddenly my revenge is in my hand and I wasn't even looking for it and I duck walk all over his 'Fruit of the Loom' V-neck as big as a tent and grind shards of glass into those ochre sweat stains in the armpits that smell like rotted cabbage thinking 'May the road rise up to meet you' and tell myself Jesus Christ be careful it's treacherous slippy I could break both ankles here reading a curly faded label specifying a size outside the range of morality resorting to letters, fifty-something XXX, like a super warning, and it's so fucking big it covers the whole green slick of first pressing extra virgin olive oil.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

MARIE ALTZINGER was born in Luxembourg in 1960 and has lived in Dublin since 1966. A graduate of University College, Dublin, she has worked in PR, as a librarian and as an editor. 'Fraying at the Edges' won the 1997 Maurice Walsh Short Story Competition and in the same year she also won the Fallen Leaves Short Story Competition. She is now working on her first novel.

BRIEGE DUFFAUD was born in Crossmaglen, Co. Armagh, in 1941 and spent most of her adult life in London, Amsterdam and the South of France. All her early stories appeared in *The Irish Press* 'New Irish Writing', her first, in 1980, winning her a Hennessy Literary Award. Poolbeg Press published her first collection and also her first novel, *A Wreath Upon the Dead*, which was translated into French. She now lives in Brittany.

JOHN EVANS was born in Wexford in 1966. 'Surviving Sophia' is his first story to be published and last year Marino published his first novel, *Pilgrims*. After several years working in Germany, he recently returned to Dublin where he and his wife now live.

ARNOLD FANNING was born in London of Irish parents in 1969 and has lived in Ireland since he was one year old. His stories have been published in 'little magazines' in Ireland and the US.

JANE S. FLYNN was born in Atlantic City of Irish-American parents in 1939. A graduate of Temple University, Philadelphia, she moved to Ireland in 1978 and married a traditional singer from Co. Clare. She won the 1993 *Image* / Oil of Ulay Short Story competition and was a prizewinner in the 1995 Maurice Walsh Competition. She has also had a story read on BBC's Radio Four.

MARIE HANNIGAN was born in London but has lived in Donegal

since the age of two. Her stories have been published in many Irish periodicals and broadcast on RTE. Twice a winner of the Listowel Writers' Week Award, she has recently completed her first collection.

SHANE HARRISON was born in Dublin in 1955. After a spell working for the Department of Posts and Telegraphs, he entered the College of National Art and Design and became a graphic designer. He began to write in 1983 and has had stories in Irish magazines. His collection, *Blues before Dawn*, was published by Poolbeg Press in 1993.

WILLIAM HODDER was born in the North Parish, Cork City, in 1951 and is a graduate of University College, Cork. He writes poetry and fiction in both Irish and English and his first verse collection in Irish was published by Coiscéim in 1996. A teacher of Irish, Latin and Religion, he is at present working on a novel in English.

JUDY KRAVIS was born in England in 1947 and moved to Ireland in 1974 to teach French literature at University College, Cork. She has published fiction and poetry in periodicals in Ireland, France and the US, as well as academic studies for Cambridge University Press and Cork University Press.

CHUCK KRUGER was born in 1938 and grew up in the Finger Lakes District of New York State. A graduate of Washington University in literature, he studied psychology at the C. G. Jung Institute in Switzerland and was a teacher and lecturer in Zurich for twenty-six years. In 1986 he and his wife purchased a farm on Cape Clear Island, Co. Cork and have lived there since 1992. A prolific writer of non-fiction, poetry and short stories, he won the 1998 Cork Literary Review Short Story Competition.

EITHNE LE GOFF was born in Dublin in 1960 and educated at University College, Dublin. A librarian, she is currently writing a novel based on a nineteenth-century murder case. 'Childlights' is her first work to be published.

TESS MARTIN was born in Omagh, Co. Tyrone in 1926. She was a maths teacher in England until her retirement, when she started

to write stories, mostly about the homeless with whom she worked. Among many competition successes she won the Story Award in the 1996 Wells Festival of Literature. She died early last year after a brief illness, but while in hospital she was able to hear one of her stories being read on BBC Radio 4 and also to receive notification that 'Taboo' would be published in this anthology.

COLUM McCANN was born in Dublin in 1967. He won a Hennessy Literary Award in 1990 and in 1994 Phoenix House published his widely acclaimed début collection, *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, followed by two novels. He now lives in the USA.

MOLLY McCLOSKEY was born in Philadelphia in 1964 and studied English literature at St Joseph's University in the city. She has lived in Co. Sligo since 1989. She won the George A. Birmingham Short Story Award in 1991 and 1994, and the RTE Francis MacManus Award in 1995. *Solomon's Seal*, her first collection, was published by Phoenix House in 1997 and she is now working on a novel.

EDEL MOLONEY was born in Dún Laoghaire, Co. Dublin in 1961 and now lives in Kildare. 'Dead Hound Walking' is her first story to be published.

ORLA MURPHY was born in Cork in 1948 and studied English and Music at University College, Cork. Her first short story was published in *The Irish Press* 'New Irish Writing' and she has had poetry in Irish periodicals. She is now writing a novel.

JAMIE O'NEILL was born in 1961 of Irish parentage and brought up in Dún Laoghaire, Co. Dublin. He produced dance-theatre collaborations for the London and Welsh stage, one of which toured the European art houses. His short stories have appeared in the prestigious *Winter's Tales* series and he also published two novels, with a third on the way. He lives and works in London.

JOSEPH O'NEILL was born in Cork in 1964 and educated in the Netherlands and England. A barrister, he practised in London until his recent move to the US. Faber published his first two novels, *This Is the Life* and *The Breezes*, to wide acclaim.

SEAN O'REILLY was born in Derry in 1969. He lived abroad for many years and only recently returned to Ireland. An M.Phil. in Creative Writing of Trinity College, Dublin, one of his stories was published in *Stand*. He is now writing a novel.

EAMON SWEENEY was born in Dublin in 1942 and educated at St Conleth's and Gonzaga College. He is head of the Department of Histopathology at Trinity College, Dublin and has contributed extensively to medical scientific journals. 'Leonora's Message' is his first story to be published.

MICHAEL TAFT was born in Sacramento, California in 1948 and has lived in Dublin since 1981. He has had two short stories in the *Sunday Tribune* 'New Irish Writing', one of which won the Best Emerging Fiction Award and was included in the *Hennessy Book of Irish Fiction* published by New Island Books.

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